Learning from Past and Present Uses of the Term 'Literacy'

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Abstract

This paper is an outline of a selective etymological history of the word ‘literacy’ in English, along with contemporary definitions of the term in political and research settings. The author identifies two common strands between past and present uses of the term literacy: (1) literacy as a facility with texts; and (2) literacy as a way of being. The author traces how these strands have largely remained the same for centuries, albeit with important distinctions, and suggests that new ways of thinking about literacy are called for in the 21st century.

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As Bakhtin (1981) has noted, the relationship between a word and the thing that it signifies is not neutral and objective. Instead, every word "finds the object at which it was directed already as it were overlain with qualifications, open to dispute, charged with value" (p. 276). The word *literacy* is no exception; rather than objectively referring to some universal skill such as reading or writing, this term has been overlain with points of view, value judgments, and connotations throughout the centuries that it and proto-types of it have been in use. Each previous meaning of the word has left "a trace in all its semantic layers" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276), which carries implications for how the term *literacy* is understood today. A brief look to past uses of the term *literacy* in the English language may therefore provide insight into the ways that the word is used today and point directions for how the term might be used with more empowering and humane consequences in the future.

Lettrede or lewed?: English Uses of the Word 'Literacy' in the Middle Ages

The word *literacy* stems from the Latin word *literra,* denoting a letter of the alphabet, and sharing a common root with the words *letter*, *literate*, and *literature* (Kress, 1997; Williams, 1977). Of these words, *letter* was the first that appeared on the scene in English (Letter, 1989) when, by the early thirteenth century, the word *lettres* designated symbols that comprised the alphabet. A hundred years later, *lettre* was used by renowned authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Langland to connote any written text that used these alphabetic letters. In the first quarter of the fourteenth century, around the same time that *lettre* came to signify a piece of writing or text, the term *lettered* came into being to designate educated and learned people who could read and write letters, both in the sense of alphabetic symbols and whole texts (Lettered, 1989). Because it would be many centuries before printing presses would make possible the

mass distribution of printed texts, the ability to be *lettered* was reserved largely for clerics and nobility.

As a point of contradistinction, English writers in the Middle Ages and Renaissance sometimes contrasted the words *lettered* or *learned* with the word *lewed,* a term that in its early days simply signified somebody who was unlearned (Lettered, 1989). For instance, in 1225 St. Juliana wrote the phrase: “Alle lewede men þat understonden ne mahen latines ledene,” translatable as “all lewd men that didn’t understand how to produce Latin language” (Lewd, 1989). Soon, *lewed* developed class-based connotations, first indicating those of the ‘common’ or ‘lower’ orders who were ‘ill-mannered’ and ‘ignorant,’ and later acquiring the meaning of lasciviousness and immorality. The term lettered, then, came to be associated and paired with terms such as *elegance*, *wit*, and *good breeding*, whereas *unlettered* and *lewd* people were demonized variously as being *Barbarians, unenlightened, children, peasants, plain, savage, ignorant, base, unruly, unhonest,* and characterized by *harlotrye,* to borrow the spelling from Chaucer (Unlettered, 1989; Lewd, 1989).

What can be learned from the early English etymological history of the word *literra*? Two distinct strands of definitions emerge. First, being *lettered* applied to a facility with reading and writing texts with letters. This ability led to the second definition of *lettered,* used to designate a certain kind of person, a *lettered* person, who was produced as the result of reading and writing. This person was not lewd, common, or ignorant as a child (to use the common parlance of the time), but instead was companionable, witty, and elegant with good taste. According to its proto-definitions, then, *literacy* was not just a skill, but a characteristic of a particular type of person. Moreover, in the de facto context of the Middle Ages, the lettered person was largely defined in terms of social class and access to printed reading materials.

'Literacy' and Politics in Recent History

The terms *literate* and *illiterate* emerged in published texts several generations after *lettered* and *unlettered*. Unlike the latter terms, which were often used to describe personal characteristics of individuals, the terms *literate* and *illiterate* came to be used throughout the nineteenth century to depict qualities of social classes in political contexts, for instance, in debates over whether or not this characteristic should determine whether people could vote or register for the army (Illiterate, 1989; Literate, 1989).

In the history of the English language, the actual word *literacy* emerged relatively late on the scene, first appearing in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Williams, 1977). Like its predecessors *lettered* and *literate,* the term *literacy* referred to more than the ability to read and write alphabetic letters, although this skill was still central to definitions of the word. Like *lettered,* this word was still paired with ways of being, which included being "refined [in] habits and tastes" (Literacy, 1989). Continuing the trend that had begun with the word *literate,* the term literacy was also often paired with large-scale political, social, and economic goals as well.

Several examples illustrate the overtly political and societal nature of the term *literacy* as it was used in the late nineteenth century and the ensuing decades. For instance, in 1883, the *New England Journal of Education* praised Massachusetts for being "the first state in the Union in literacy," using the term *literacy* to compare the general reading abilities of people in one state to people in other states (as quoted in Literacy, 1989). Similarly, in World War Two, writers of the *American Magazine* declared America's mission to "help many of the poverty-stricken peoples to set their feet on the path of education, manual dexterity, and economic literacy" (as quoted in Literacy, 1989). Later in the twentieth century and beyond, international organizations such as United Nations have worked toward "the promotion of literacy" in countries around the world

"in the context of poverty reduction" (UNESCO, 2007, para. 1; see also Street, 1984). The term *literacy,* then, has been used for political purposes when making large-scale comparisons between peoples of different social groups, and it is often charged with economic undertones.

Street (1984) and others (Luke & Freebody, 1997; Scribner & Cole, 1981) have asserted that the term *literacy* is just as ideologically, economically, culturally, and politically charged today as related English terms were in 1300. According to Street (1995), national legislative assemblies and international organizations use the word literacy as though it were a politically neutral, autonomous skill, divorced from any social context. In other words, these institutions present literacy—usually connected with the ability to read and write—as a universally beneficial skill that will promote the intellectual development of those who acquire it (Goody & Watt, 1963), whether they are from rural Mississippi, inner-city New York, Yemen, or the Congo. By extension, this intellectual development is believed to lead to economic development (UNESCO, 2007). Street (1995) has noted that this definition of literacy has often been used as leverage to assert cultural superiority. In other words, by defining literacy as the ability to read and write printed texts, or by defining literacy as the ability to demonstrate competence on Eurocentric assessments, Western cultures can devalue oral traditions, the use of images, or other ways of communicating valued by indigenous peoples across the world (Cole, 1996).

As in former ages, two distinct meanings for the word *literacy* have persisted. First, the ability to read and write texts continues to be connected to the term. Street has called this designation the autonomous definition of literacy. The second sense of the term *literacy* is connected to produce a certain kind of person: an intellectually-developed person who can and will vote and lift herself or himself out of poverty. The previous semantic layer of the term, indicating one with "refined habits and tastes," has not vanished, but the person produced by

literacy now is a good citizen, defined in terms of her or his ability to contribute to the uplift of society. (Perhaps people within some societies do not believe the attendant implication that they need to be 'uplifted' or 'intellectually developed.') As in ages before, definitions of *literacy* are intertwined with issues of economic power and cultural or class bias.

Two-stranded Conceptions of Literacy in Literacy Research

Along with these political organizations, literacy researchers have adopted versions of this two-stranded definition as well. For instance, Norris and Phillips (2003), in explicating the debated term *scientific literacy,* proposed two ways of conceptualizing it: (1) *fundamental* scientific literacy, which refers to an individual's ability to read and write texts with scientific content; and (2) *derived* scientific literacy, which refers to ways of being that stem from this reading and writing. These ways of being include being knowledgeable, learned, and educated in science, along with exhibiting scientific 'habits of mind,' such as curiosity and skepticism (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1993; National Research Council, 1996). The derived sense of scientific literacy may also encompass active citizenship as people apply what they know about nature and science to make the world a better place (Roth & Barton, 2004). Under this framework, reading and writing is a *fundamental* prerequisite to being a scientist, or one who has developed scientific habits of mind and who works toward the improvement of living conditions and environmental conditions.

Knobel and Lankshear (2007), too, have developed a comparable, though not identical, two-threaded definition of literacy as they distinguish between 'big L' literacy and 'little l' literacy. According to the authors, "Literacy, with a 'small l,' describes the actual processes of reading, writing, viewing, listening, manipulating images and sound…and using words and symbols that are part of…larger, more embodied Literacy practices" (p. 220). In other

words, though 'little l' literacy in this definition is no longer limited to a facility with printed words, it nonetheless is firmly connected to people's facility with reading and writing texts, albeit multimodal ones.

In contrast, "Big L literacies are connected with identities, patterns, and *ways of being* in

the world rather than solely with the acts of reading and writing" (Lewis, 2007, p. 240; emphasis added). Knobel and Lankshear (2007) and Lewis grounded this definition of Literacies in Gee's (1996, 2008) previous work. According to Gee (2008), literacy can be conceptualized in terms of identities enacted within given Discourses, or ways of being in the world that integrate ways of communicating through clothes, gestures, actions, use of specialized tools, spoken words, written words, images, music, and so forth. For example, in chronicling her experiences while hiking the Appalachian Trail, Rush (2003) defined literacy in relation to her ability to read her own body, including physical sensations and the color of her urine; to read environmental conditions; to keep a trail journal; to use topographic maps to guide her; and to communicate with other hikers through signing registers in shelters, leaving trail markers, and holding conversations. Rush enacted an identity as a member of the Discourse of thru-hikers through reading, writing, speaking, valuing, acting, and interacting in relation to Discourse-specific texts.

In contemporary definitions such as these ones, Literacy continues to be associated with a way of being that is desirable according to the norms and values of a given Discourse. Knobel and Lanskhear (2007) clarified that, in today's technological landscape, Literacy practices included "*being* a fan…, *being* privy to a plethora of online—and offline—affinity space 'insider jokes,' *being* familiar and up-to-date with Hollywood movies" (p. 221; emphasis added).

Whether this state of being is connected to being a fan*,* being a thru-hiker, being a chemist, or (to use an anachronism) being a noble, Literacy in this sense encompasses the enactment of identities in such a way that people are recognizable to themselves and to others as being a member of a Discourse. Under this two-tiered definition of the term *literacy,* reading and writing practices are subsumed and given meaning by people's ways of being.

Little 'l' literacy: Past and Present Differences

In some senses, current conceptualizations of *literacy* bear striking similarities to those of English writers of the 1300s and before. For centuries, definitions of *literacy* have been two-fold: relating to a facility with texts and to a state of being that is tied in some way to this facility. There are, however, important differences between past and present conceptualizations of *literacy,* both in the sense of *facility with texts* and in the sense of a *way of being.* Clarifying some of these differences will help to highlight problems in contemporary uses of the term.

Literacy in English, in its *fundamental* or *little l* sense, was initially considered in relation to the ability to read and write printed letters. This meaning has left a discernable "trace in the word's semantic layers," since *literacy* is etymologically derived from the word *littera,* or letter. Although texts have always been multimodal—spoken words, gestures, architectural layouts, clothing, songs, and so forth—at the time when the distinction between *lettered* and *unlettered* came about, only higher classes had widespread access to printed alphabetic texts and tutors to provide instruction on how to read and write them. As a marker of social privilege, proto-types of the word *literacy* came to be associated with this limited skill, rather than with the ability to create songs, dances, clothes, spoken words, drawings in the sand, room designs, and other multimodal texts to which 'common' people had access.

Literacy is still conceptualized in relations to texts, with *text* now defined as any instance of communication using any semiotic resource (Kress, 2003). In today's digital age, however, issues of accessibility have changed. Whereas previous conceptions of the word *literacy* were defined in relation to access to printed letters, now many definitions of literacy are conjoined with access to various types of media. *New literacies* (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006) are defined in part by their inclusion of new technologies, such as the Internet and cell phones, which provide new material resources and potentialities for the development of 'small l' literacy (Ranker, 2008). *Media literacy,* too, can be defined in relation to a person's attitude toward, evaluation of, and experience in reading and designing texts made possible by recent printing and dissemination technologies (Hobbs, 2007; Semali, 2001). Media literacy may include recognizing and negotiating the social positionings inherent in the exchange of these texts, including comic books, computer games, music, films, and any combination of these (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000).

In all, although 'small l literacy' and its predecessors entailed a facility with texts, two aspects surrounding this definition have changed. First, conceptions of that facility have been in flux: from being able to write a signature as an indicator of literacy (Flood & Lapp, 1995), to critically evaluating and resisting how popular culture texts position subjects (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000), and more. Thus, while the word *literacy* has been used to connote a facility with reading and writing texts, the nature of that facility and how to measure it are a matter of debate. Second, conceptualizations of what counts as *text* have changed due to technology and its attendant multimodal capacities. Even though texts have always been multimodal, people who did not read and write printed letters were often considered to be *illiterate.* Now, people who can

only read and write alphabetic letters may be viewed as lacking in literacy skills vital to a current digital age, which is characterized by moving images, sound, and other texts on various screens.

'Big L' Literacy: Past and Present Differences

Conceptualizations of 'big L' Literacy, associated with ways of being, have multiplied as well. The term *lettered* in early English writings was associated with being educated, learned, and refined—qualities generally reserved for upper classes. Now, however, current sociocultural theorists (e.g., Gee, 2008) connect the term *literacy* with ways of being that fit into specialized Discourses, which may or may not be primarily defined in terms of class. This approach to literacy assumes that literacy as a chemist may entail reading notations of elements, writing observations of reactions in anticipation of adjusting levels of certain chemicals, and so forth, while in contrast, literacy as a hip hop artist may require an entirely different set of literacies. This pluralization of the term literacy recognizes not only new forms of texts, but also new social configurations in which these texts are valued.

Some recent sociocultural theories of Literacy also invert previously-held beliefs about the relationship between 'big L' and 'small l' literacies. In the past, ways of being—such as educated, refined, and economically self-sufficient—were said to *derive* from the ability to read and write. To be sure, many current political organizations and literacy researchers still assert that ways of being result from reading and writing. Norris and Phillips' (2003) terminology, distinguishing *fundamental* from *derived* scientific literacy, is a prime example of this mindset. In this cause-and-effect model, the *being-ness* of a scientist, encompassing scientific habits of mind and ways of acting, are said to derive from the previous ability to read and write and scientific texts.

In contrast, many current researchers and theorists (e.g., Gee, 2008; Lewis & Fabos, 2005) who adopt a sociocultural stance toward literacy have emphasized people's identities in social contexts as being fundamental, with reading and writing practices at times deriving from those identities. In this latter conception of 'big L/little l' literacies, reading/writing practices and identity construction are mutually constitutive and recursive, rather than existing in a linear cause-and-effect relationship as in some previous and current articulations of the word *literacy.*

Critiquing Current Conceptions of Big L/Little l Literacy

With this selective sketch of various uses of the word *literacy* as a backdrop, I now move to critique current definitions of *literacy* under the belief that these definitions potentially obfuscate or reify the practices and identities of people who read, design, and use texts. I argue first that, given its historical connotations, (little l) 'literacy' is a problematic term to apply to a facility with multimodal texts, and secondly, that theories of the relationship between 'little l/big l' literacies should more fully account for people's material conditions that enable or deny *literacy* to them.

Current notions of 'small l' literacy, including the notion of 'multi-literacies' which theorizes literacy in terms of reading and designing multimodal texts (e.g., New London Group, 1996), can be problematic. The reading and writing of lettered texts require a distinctive and unique set of processes—connecting alphabetic symbols to form words in syntactically comprehensible sentences, for instance (Kress, 2003). Moreover, the mode of written letters has its own distinct affordances: It requires the unfolding of events through time, word after word, unlike other modes such as images that display all components of a text simultaneously. If the reading and writing of printed texts involves a distinguishable set of processes, and if the texts themselves have distinct semiotic affordances, then literacy researchers may obfuscate the

semiotic resources and processes involved in designing different kinds of texts—such as videos and music—by subsuming these processes under the title of *literacy*.

Given the etymological origins of the word *literacy* in its 'little l' sense of *facility with texts*, perhaps literacy researchers do a dishonor to other modes by forcing this terminology on this concept. Kress (2003) has noted that terms such 'non-print' or 'paralinguistic systems of communication' privilege printed words and language, when people might also refer to words as 'non-gestural' or 'para-gestural systems of communication' if they wanted to privilege the mode of gestures. In other words, modes should not be defined primarily by their relationship to written words, but instead should be considered legitimate systems of communication in their own right. By applying the term *literacy* with its letter-based etymology to these sign systems, people may actually be importing print-centric connotations and values that diminish the independent legitimacy of these modes.

Current notions of 'big L' literacy, defined as a way of being derived from the reading and writing of texts, should be re-examined, questioned, and challenged as well. I return to the example of the nobleman, who because he read and wrote alphabetic texts, could consider himself *lettered* and thus more refined, polite, educated, and companionable than the *lewd* masses of unlettered people. In this example, *educated* and *refined* were not just ways of being; they were indicators of access to economic and social capital. I return next to the example of the woman traversing the Appalachian Trail, whose literacies in reading urine and trail markers, among other texts, contributed to her successful enactment of an identity as a thru-hiker. This Discourse, like all Discourses, was characterized by issues of access and capital—those with physical handicaps that prevented them from walking could not have enacted this identity. Thus, they would have been barred access to developing literacy in relation to thru-hiking.

In today's digital age, perhaps one of the most important markers of Literacy is connected to students' identities in relation to the proliferation and "multiplicity of communications channels and media" (New London Group, 1996 p. 61; see also Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). An acknowledgment of the importance of material resources raises important questions for a 'multi-literacies' framework (New London Group, 1996). If a key tenet of 'multi-literacies' is that adolescents draw from "available designs"—such as images, genres of printed words, music, and so forth—to create re-designed texts, then the question remains: To whom are these initial designs available? Do some adolescents have prolonged access to valued social networks, denied to others, in which they can learn how to design texts that are appropriate for powerful Discourses? Do some adolescents have greater access to actual material resources required for particular text designs—such as Internet access, computer editing programs, I-phones, and other communication technologies that are constantly changing? If literacy is theorized in terms of using 'available designs,' then are those who have more access to certain designs (and the materials with which to make them) more 'Literate'?

Literacy, when defined in terms of new communication technologies, also requires material resources. Those who enact identities as bloggers or online fans require access to a working computer and Internet connection, parents who allow them to go online, time to go online, and perhaps online or offline friends who can make initial recommendations of sites or programs, along with showing them the ropes. In fact, adolescents with the best material resources—for instance, scanners; Video Studio Editor; computers with a lot of memory to hold music and videos; multiple computers in one home so they do not have to compete with their siblings for time online but instead can have ample blocks of uninterrupted time on the Net—may be those who appear the most proficient at navigating digital literacies. If the term *literacy*

is associated only with skills or with ways of being, and not primarily with access to material resources, then using the term may serve to naturalize and hide the fact that the “haves” are granted ways of being (blogger, educated, thru-hiker) that the “have-nots” are not granted. In this sense, *accessibility* to ways of being, rather than *Literacy* in ways of being, is perhaps a more fitting term.

In sum, *literacy*—in both its big L and little l senses—has long been a divider and a way for people with more material resources to assert superiority over those without material resources. This trend began in the earliest uses of proto-types of the word literacy, when noblemen could read and write letters and could therefore project themselves as *learned* in opposition to the *lewd* masses of ‘common’ people. In today’s digital age, access to different communication technologies is now one potent divisor in current conceptions of who ‘has’ literacy and who does not. Consequently, literacy researchers and policy makers would do well to consider how they use the term *literacy* in conjunction with ‘abilities’ and ‘ways of being,’ lest they continue to perpetuate the denial of literacy to people who lack access to certain types of material resources.

Conclusion

According to Bakhtin (1981), “the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads…it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue” (p. 276). For a word such as *literacy*—which has a centuries-old history fraught with contention, ideology, class structures, and overt political objectives—this statement rings especially true. I have suggested that *literacy* is not the most apt term to apply to ‘small l’ literacy practices with ‘non-print’ texts such as dance or images, nor is *literacy* the most apt term

to apply to identity enactment within a Discourse. I do not intend for this paper to signal a closure or an attempt at a definitional statement of literacy—indeed, I would not wish to make such a statement even if I could. Instead, I conceive of this paper as a point of consideration, another utterance spoken in the vast array of dialogic threads concerning the definition of literacy. I do consider this paper to be a call to use the word literacy—in both the ‘big L’ and ‘small l’ sense—in ways that do not devalue ‘non-print’ communicative systems, and in ways that explicitly acknowledge that some people have access to material resources while others are excluded from this access. By considering these factors in discussions of literacy, it is my hope that literacy research will be both clearer and more empowering for the people whose lives are impacted by this research.

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