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# LITERACY IN AMERICAN LIVES

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*For Hannah Brandt,  
who showed me how to write.  
And Del Brandt,  
who showed me why to write.*

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*Madison, Wisconsin  
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## INTRODUCTION

### *The Pursuit of Literacy*

Literacy is so much an expectation in this country that it has become more usual to ask why and how people fail to learn to read and write than to ask why and how they succeed. In a society in which virtually every child attends school and where some kind of print penetrates every corner of existence, only the strongest sorts of countervailing forces – oppression, deprivation, dislocation – seem able to exclude a person from literacy. Asked to imagine how their lives would be different if they didn't know how to read and write, people I have spoken with are often baffled and pained. "I would be totally in the dark," they say. Or, "It would be like not having shoes."

To think of literacy as a staple of life – on the order of indoor lights or clothing – is to understand how thoroughly most Americans in these times are able to take their literacy for granted. It also is to appreciate how central reading and writing can be to people's sense of security and well-being, even to their sense of dignity. At the same time, these analogies ask us to take a deeper look. They remind us that, as with electricity or manufactured goods, individual literacy exists only as part of larger material systems, systems that on the one hand enable acts of reading or writing and on the other hand confer their value. Changes in these systems change the meaning and status of individual literacy much as the newest style of shoes – or method of producing shoes – might enhance or depreciate the worth of the old. Further, these analogies remind us that, despite a tendency to take the resource of literacy for granted, acquiring literacy – like acquiring other basic staples of life – remains an active, sometimes

daunting process for individuals and families. This process is exacerbated by turbulent economic changes that do not merely raise standards for literacy achievement from one generation to the next but often ruthlessly reconfigure the social and economic systems through which literacy can be pursued and through which it can find its worth.

This book is about how ordinary people have learned to read and write during the century just concluded. It is also about how they have made use of that learning at various stages of their lives. Learning to read and write has taken place amid convulsive changes in economic and social life, educational expectations, and communication technologies. This has been a time when the meaning of what it is to be literate has seemed to shift with nearly every new generation. Inevitably, pursuing literacy in the twentieth century entailed learning to respond to an unprecedented pace of change in the uses, forms, and standards of literacy. One of the major aims of this book is to look closely at the sources of the changing conditions of literacy learning and especially at the ways that Americans have faced the escalating pressure to provide for themselves and their children the kinds of literate skill demanded by life in these times.

Literacy has proven to be a difficult and contentious topic of investigation largely because its place in American culture has become so complex and even conflicted. Expanding literacy undeniably has been an instrument for more democratic access to learning, political participation, and upward mobility. At the same time, it has become one of the sharpest tools for stratification and denial of opportunity. Print in the twentieth century was the sea on which ideas and other cultural goods flowed easily among regions, occupations, and social classes. But it also was a mechanism by which the great bureaucracies of modern life tightened around us, along with their systems of testing, sorting, controlling, and coercing. The ability to read and, more recently, to write often helps to catapult individuals into higher economic brackets and social privilege. Yet the very broadening of these abilities among greater numbers of people has enabled economic and technological changes that now destabilize and devalue once serviceable levels of literate skills. Unending cycles of competition and change keep raising the stakes for literacy achievement. In fact, as literacy has gotten implicated in almost all of the ways that money is now made in America, the reading and writing skills of the population have become grounds for unprecedented encroachment and concern by those who profit from what those skills produce. In short, literacy is valuable – and volatile – property. And like other commodities with private and public value, it is a grounds for potential exploitation, injustice, and struggle as well as potential hope, satisfac-

tion, and reward. Wherever literacy is learned and practiced, these competing interests will always be present.

This study explores these complexities and contradictions through the perspectives of 80 Americans born between 1895 and 1985. In interviews conducted in the early 1990s, they explored with me their memories of how they learned to write and read, from their earliest childhood memories to the present day. Through their testimonies, I especially hoped to understand better what sharply rising standards for literacy have meant to successive generations of Americans and how – as students, workers, parents, and private and public citizens – they have responded to rapid changes in the meanings and methods of literacy learning.

For at least 20 years, there have been serious research efforts to treat literacy “in context.” From different disciplinary perspectives, studies in psychology, anthropology, linguistics, child development, and critical education have provided persuasive evidence that literacy abilities are nested in and sustained by larger social and cultural activity. Reading and writing occur instrumentally as part of broader activities (for instance, working, worshipping, governing, teaching and learning, relaxing). It is these activities that give reading and writing their purpose and point. Contexts constitute the meanings for which we reach during reading and writing and in that way help to constitute (and can hinder) our ability to read or write. Contextual perspectives tend to emphasize the relational nature of reading and writing: People build up and exercise skills through participation with others in particular contexts. This perspective also tends to recognize the multiplicity of literacy abilities and their legitimacy: As social groups differ in their cultural expressions or class locations, for instance, so will preferred ways of reading and writing differ. In fact, this perspective tends to eschew references to skills or abilities at all, focusing instead on the concept of literate practices, emphasizing the grounded, routinized, multiple, and socially sanctioned ways in which reading and writing occur. Attention to the situated nature of literacy also has provided avenues for treating the ideological dimensions of literacy, the politics by which reading and writing preferences of elite groups get installed as the measure against which other versions are deemed inadequate or undesirable.<sup>1</sup>

Contextual perspectives have developed in challenge to views that equate literacy only with the technical matters of decoding or encoding of written language, a literacy lodged merely in discrete linguistic and scribal skills such as sounding out, spelling, or semantic fluency. This narrower approach has been faulted for treating literacy as if it were a decontextualized skill, neutral, self-contained, portable, a skill that can be acquired once and for all and used and measured transparently without regard to

contextual conditions. Although this narrow, technical approach continues to influence literacy instruction and assessment in schools, there are growing calls for approaches to literacy that more rigorously incorporate the realities of its situated dimensions. From a contextual perspective, literate abilities originate in social postures and social knowledge that begin well before and extend well beyond words on a page. Serious programs of literacy instruction, many argue, must teach toward these contextual and contextualizing dimensions of literacy if they are to be successful and just.

*Literacy in American Lives* shares generally in this contextual perspective on literacy, if for no other reason than it was only through attention to specific material facts of people's experiences with literacy that I could address the questions that mattered to me most: How has literacy learning changed over the last century and how have rising expectations for literacy been experienced as part of felt life? Answers to those questions demanded that I pay close attention to what people could remember about the specific scenes of their learning: where they were, who else was present, what materials they used, and so on. I also knew when I started that I would be foregrounding some aspects of context, namely, the biographical context of learning over a lifetime and the comparative context of generational cohorts, that are not usually treated in research and theory on literacy.<sup>2</sup> As the analysis proceeded, additional elements of context – especially economics and history – surged into view and became vital for explaining what I found. Economic transformations, as they appeared in family work, regional restructuring, communication systems, and political organization, were the engine of change in literacy learning, setting an especially brisk pace over the last several decades. And history, by which I mostly refer to the society's collective accumulation of experience, materials, know-how, and education, as well as the forward and backward projections of its institutions, laws, and social movements, provided the principal means to which people appealed as they made, or tried to make, these changes. In fact, as we will see, as the forms and products of literacy proliferated across time and across generations, the accumulating history of literacy itself came to press on the scenes of new literacy learning in increasingly complicated ways, serving to enable and sometimes to impede acts of learning.

The analysis that follows focuses, then, on relationships between individual literacy development and large-scale economic development, as the two played out in specific ways and in specific places in the 80 lives that I studied. It was in this relationship that both the major pressures for change and the major opportunities for learning came into relationship. It was also this intersection that illuminated the competing interests that came to surround

literacy as it rose in exploitable economic value, especially in the second half of the last century. Certainly the role of economic change in raising standards and expectations for literacy is widely recognized and much discussed. No government report or labor forecast or educational mission statement these days goes without mentioning that postindustrial conditions now require all Americans to attain higher levels of skill, especially in reading and writing.<sup>3</sup> This study, however, considers these changes in work and economic relations as they have affected the contexts in which literacy learning itself takes place: how the persistent demand for higher and higher levels of skill became the overriding condition in which literacy learning would be conducted. The investigation is meant to capture a dual dynamic in the experiences of the people I talked with: the ways that they have pursued literacy and the ways that it has pursued them.

For purposes of this study, literacy skill is treated primarily as a resource – economic, political, intellectual, spiritual – which, like wealth or education, or trade skill or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers. To treat literacy in this way is to understand not only why individuals labor to attain literacy but also to appreciate why, as with any resource of value, organized economic and political interests work so persistently to conscript and ration the powers of literacy for their own competitive advantage. The status of literacy as a valued resource in this society accounts, then, for both the value of literacy for individual learners and the value that literate individuals have in wider arenas of economic competition into which their skills are recruited. As a resource, literacy has potential payoff in gaining power or pleasure, in accruing information, civil rights, education, spirituality, status, money.<sup>4</sup> To treat literacy as a resource is to appreciate the lengths that families and individuals will go to secure (or resecure) literacy for themselves or their children. But it also takes into account how the resources of literacy skill are exploited in competitions for profit or advantage that go on within the larger communities in which people live and work and in which their literacy learning takes place.

Of course, acquiring the resources of reading or writing, even in ample amounts, cannot guarantee desired ends. Nor does gaining literacy inoculate against discriminations of various kinds.<sup>5</sup> Further, calling literacy a valued resource is not meant to imply that reading and writing are morally or functionally superior to other forms of human activity. Rather, this way of treating literacy simply acknowledges the practical meaning that literacy has for most citizens at the start of the twenty-first century. Literacy counts in life as people find it, although how much it counts, what it counts for, and how it pays off vary considerably.

The concept of resource may remind some readers of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital: the conglomeration of skills, credentials, and relationships of obligation that families and individuals use to jockey for and maintain class status. It may remind others of Gary Becker's sense of human capital: the ways that individuals and companies invest in and profit by the development of intellectual capacities.<sup>6</sup> But the term also invites, I hope, broader connotations that will take on resonance as this study unfolds. Literacy is a resource in the way that electricity is a resource: Its circulation keeps lights on. Literacy is also a productive resource, a means of production and reproduction, including a means by which legacies of human experience move from past to future and by which, for many, identities are made and sustained. At the same time, seeing literacy as a productive resource in economic terms makes it analogous in some ways to natural resources or raw materials. What land was to the agricultural economy or iron to the manufacturing economy, people's skills are to the information economy.<sup>7</sup> Workers these days produce wealth not only by processing raw materials but by supplying those raw materials themselves in the form of knowledge and skills, including communication skills. The struggles that have always raged over ownership of the means of production can only confound the struggles that have always accompanied literacy learning and teaching in this society.

In terms of the analytical methods of this study, treating literacy in such broad, connotative ways tries to do justice to the simultaneous forces at play in the complex episodes of literacy learning as people described them. In addressing the question of how they learned to write and read, people sometimes turned their attention to the resources on hand for developing as writers or readers – that is, where it was that they found opportunity, assistance, inspiration, or information. Quite frequently, people's learning registered as an effort to improve their skills – to enlarge their resourcefulness, in a sense, to meet new conditions. Learning also appeared as surplus, as a by-product of performing tasks, an inevitable outcome of putting literacy resources into service. And on a more abstract level, the resource of literacy appeared as an available collective good, a cultural equivalent of water or air that connected individuals to the human systems of their time and place. It was in trying unsuccessfully to separate and categorize these expressions of learning that I profoundly appreciated why definitions of literacy prove so difficult and contentious. In any case, in treating literacy as a resource, the discussion will move frequently among three closely related themes: *Literacy learning* principally will refer to specific occasions when people take on new understandings or capacities; as we will see, literacy learning is not confined to school settings or

formal study. *Literacy development* refers to the accumulating project of literacy learning across a lifetime, the interrelated effects and potentials of learning over time. It is closely connected to the life span and to historical events that affect literacy as a collective good. *Literacy opportunity* refers to people's relationships to social and economic structures that condition chances for learning and development. Realistically, these three dimensions are not easy to separate and, as literacy is lived, seem to be three sides of one coin.

To treat literacy as a resource is to emphasize that it takes its shape from what can be traded on it. This perspective attends to the competitions that surround literacy, the struggles to harness it for profit or ideological advantage, the struggles for the prerogative to manage or measure it, and the ways that these incessant struggles set the terms for individual encounters with literacy. Above all, this perspective emphasizes the instability of literacy, its links to political and economic changes and to the shifting standards of value and conditions of access that accompany those changes. Literacy was at the heart of recent transformations in work and life. Tracing the dynamics of literacy learning over the twentieth century inescapably puts these changes at the center of consideration.

This study, by design, focuses on economic and other material influences in literacy. I do not wish to imply strict economic determinism nor to underestimate many other cultural aspects that figure into literacy (for instance, the ways that reading and writing can express a sense of self or group identity or other cultural dimensions). However, because economic and material conditions have been, in my view, underestimated and at times ignored in descriptive studies of literacy, I wanted to offer some useful directions for bringing economic issues more fully into view. Many recent ethnographic studies of literacy in the United States and elsewhere have worked to chronicle the diversity of literacy practices among ordinary people. These studies underscore the fact that reading and writing serve many functions, appear in many places, take many forms. They demonstrate how people achieve literacy by various avenues, how reading and writing and learning about them go on in many contexts beyond formal schooling, and often hand in hand with other cultural activities like storytelling, child rearing, and collective problem solving. Together, these studies strongly imply that literacy among the U.S. citizenry has been underestimated by standardized tests and other narrow, usually school-based measurements that miss the meanings and forms of literacy in everyday life. Uncovering as they do the often surprising vigor and ingenuity of what David Barton and Mary Hamilton have called "hidden" or "vernacular" literacy, many of these studies challenge stereotypes of low

literacy that are often pinned on people who already carry other kinds of stigmas. In addition, these often fine-grained explorations of out-of-school literacy practices provide educators with conceptual tools for bridging between the resources students bring to school and the different literacy practices they must learn to control – a model that is equally appropriate in adult and workplace literacy instruction. By expanding the perspective on literacy, by treating it fundamentally as cultural and contextualized, these studies try to democratize the worth and importance of all literacy practices. Above all, in their sheer accumulation they complicate treatments of literacy as merely a set of technical, drillable, portable skills. They display instead the complex social and cultural orchestrations that even the simplest acts of reading or writing entail. They also invite interrogation into the implications of literacy in the maintenance of racism, sexism, and other undemocratic interests.<sup>8</sup>

*Literacy in American Lives* shares many of the perspectives and motivations of this line of recent research. Indeed, this study is in deep conceptual debt to these predecessors. At the same time, however, this study tries to offer new critical frameworks for approaching everyday literacy. The diversity and multiplicity of literacy practices may rightly bear witness to cultural variety and human resourcefulness. But that is not all they tell. Multiple literacy practices are also a sign of stratification and struggle. Their variety speaks of different and often unequal subsidy systems for literacy, which often lead to differential outcomes and levels of literacy achievement. Literacy practices trail along within themselves histories of opportunities granted and opportunities denied, as well as ascending power or waning worth, legitimacy or marginality of particular literate experience. Just as illiteracy is rarely self-chosen and rarely self-created, the literacy that people practice is not the literacy they necessarily wish to practice. Focusing merely on the uses of literacy as they seem to arise from local goals and interests can obscure these complications. Ethnographic descriptions do not often speak directly enough and in a sustained way to the histories by which literacy practices arrive or do not arrive in local contexts, flourish or not in certain times and locales. Nor do they often invite a search for the interests beyond those of the local users that hold literacy practices in place, give them their meaning, or take them away. Nor do they often fully address the mixed motives, antipathies, and ambivalence with which so much literacy is learned and practiced. This study focuses heavily on the arrival of new literacy learning through a life span and across generations, brought in mostly on the coattails of economic change. It was those aspects of literacy that became salient to me as this research unfolded and came to demand my focused attention.

## Parameters of the Study

This is a study, then, about how people across the past century learned to read and write, actively, passively, willingly, resistantly, and, always, persistently, over a lifetime. It focuses on the experiences of ordinary people, some who read or write constantly and some who do so rarely, some who are able to take reading or writing with them into virtually any sphere of life where it can do some good and others who usually must trade on other means to make out. In any case, in this study, an understanding of literacy is built up from people's accounts of their lived experiences, embracing those instances in which anyone said they learned anything about reading or writing. Although encounters with literacy often blended with other activities (some people learned about writing, for instance, while drawing, calculating, reading, listening to the radio, watching television, talking), the study maintains a primary focus on the acquisition and use of alphabetic script. The interest is in reading and writing as people would mundanely and practically distinguish them from other sorts of recognizable activity (or at least as they were being recognized in the 1990s!). The study makes no attempt to measure people's literacy skills against any kind of standard (although it notices, at times, how such measurements are made). Rather, the driving concerns have to do with how people say they came to acquire or develop the resources of reading or writing – at all.

It has been commonplace, as I mentioned, to consider literacy in the plural, as sets of social practices, diverse routines that must be understood in relationship to the particular social aims and habits associated with their contexts of use. In this study, perhaps because the focus is less on how people practice literacy and more on how they have pursued it, literacy appears less settled than the term *practice* might imply. It appears more elusive, as a want, as an incursion, as an unstable currency. When literacy does appear in this study as a social practice, it is as a practice that is often jumping its tracks, propelled into new directions by new or intensifying pressures for its use.

This study is based on 80 in-depth interviews I conducted in the mid-1990s with a diverse group of Americans ranging in birth date from the late 1890s to the early 1980s. In the interviews, we traced together their memories of learning to write and, to a lesser extent, their memories of learning to read. The inquiry focused especially on the people, institutions, materials, and motivations that contributed to literacy learning, both in school and out, from birth to the present. I also explored with the people I interviewed the uses and values that literacy has had for them at

various stages of life. This study follows in the tradition of life-story research, which is a loose confederation of historical, sociological, psychological, and phenomenological inquiry. This form of research serves multiple purposes and employs various methodologies, including the collection of open-ended autobiographical monologues, structured and less structured interviews, and biographical surveys. What these diverse traditions have in common is an interest in people's descriptions of their own life experiences. A significant focus for analysis is the life span. Social psychology uses life stories to explore people's subjective worlds, seeking relationships among social structure, personality, and behavior. Other sorts of inquiries examine the linguistic forms and functions of narrative accounts themselves to uncover the meaning structures that people call on to bring order to their experiences. Perhaps the best known line of life-story research is oral history, which uses interviews to gather information about the social conditions of ordinary lives, information that is otherwise unrecorded and often overlooked in conventional histories of important people and events. In other cases, oral history is used to document multiple perspectives on public events. My study is aligned in many ways with oral history perspectives as articulated by Paul Thompson (1975, 1988, 1990) and Trevor Lummis (1987) and with the biographical sociology of Daniel Bertaux (1981, 1984).<sup>9</sup> I treat autobiographical accounts for their historical value, for their illumination of people's relationships to the social structures of their times and places, especially those in which literacy learning is implicated. Rather than searching for uniqueness or subjective differences, this study concerns itself with similarities of experience among people who experience similarly structured positions and relations. As Trevor Lummis explained,

...people live their lives within the material and cultural boundaries of their time span, and so life histories are exceptionally effective historical sources because through the totality of lived experience they reveal relations between individuals and social forces which are rarely apparent in other sources. Above all, the information is historical and dynamic in that it reveals changes of experience through time.<sup>10</sup>

Direct accounts about how ordinary people have acquired reading and writing and their motivations for doing so are largely missing from the record of mass literacy development. Most studies of the past have had to rely on indirect evidence, such as signature rates, book circulation, or the growth of schooling, with only an occasional excerpt from diaries or letters

or autobiographies to provide a more contextualized sense of the means and meaning of literacy in various eras. Only recently have we begun to accumulate more systematic and direct accounts of contemporary literacy as it has been experienced. Nevertheless, many current debates about literacy education and policy continue to be based largely on indirect evidence, such as standardized test scores or education levels or surveys of reading habits. It is the persistent interest of this study to characterize literacy not as it registers on various scales but as it has been lived.

The point of view of this investigation is roughly through birth cohorts, a method of analysis meant to capture literacy learning within what Lummis called "material and cultural boundaries" of a time span. Norman Ryder discussed the merits of birth cohort analysis in studying social change:

Each new cohort makes fresh contact with the contemporary social heritage and carries the impress of the encounter through life. This confrontation has been called the intersection of the innovative and the conservative forces in history. The members of any cohort are entitled to participate in only one slice of life – their unique location in the stream of history.<sup>11</sup>

This approach has proven especially amenable to a treatment of the changing conditions of literacy learning, especially given the ways that literacy-based technologies have been introduced across the century, entering people's lives at different ages and so with different impacts and possibilities. At the same time, though, tracing literacy through successive generations illuminates the "conservative forces" that Ryder mentioned, as we can see how older, fading forms of literacy roll along with new and emerging ones, creating new material and ideological configurations for literacy learners at any stage of life. Literacy preserves, and one of the things that it is best at preserving is itself, so an encounter with literacy will always in some sense be an encounter with its history. Consequently, what is new in literacy learning comes not merely from new technologies and their implications but from the creation of new relationships to older technologies and ways of writing and reading. Cohort analysis is especially useful for apprehending this process. Finally, the comparative perspective recognizes the close connections between social structures and communication systems and how changes in both are interrelated; literacy is not merely an expression of social structure but a dynamic element in it. What people are able to do with their writing or reading in any time and place – as well as what others do to them with writing and reading – contribute to their sense of identity, normality, possibility.

Of course, as with any investigative approach, life stories have their limitations and dangers. Especially complicating is the fact that accounts of past events inevitably are rendered through the perspective of the present. People reflect on – indeed, refashion – a memory in terms of its significance for how things have turned out, whether in terms of personal circumstances or shared culture. This is a thorny matter for the interviewer as well as those interviewed. It is especially tricky in an investigation of changing meanings of literacy, as past senses of writing or reading are apprehended through more recent realities and perspectives and the blend is hard to separate. One way to mitigate this problem, as Daniel Bertaux has suggested, is to focus people's attention on the past by remembering concrete activities and material surroundings.<sup>12</sup> Such a tactic cannot claim to yield something more objective or true but does potentially grant a return to the material scenes of past learning, a move that especially interested me. I devised an interview script by which I tried to lead participants through a chronological account of both ordinary and extraordinary encounters with writing and reading, lingering to explore their detailed recollections of the literal settings, people, and materials that animated their memories. (See Appendix.) Of course, such an approach only leads to the additional complication of the role of the questions and questioner in structuring life-story accounts. In an effort to be cooperative, those being interviewed will try to render their responses according to the perceived desires of the questioner.<sup>13</sup> Undoubtedly, the heavy hand of my interview script, shaped by the theoretical interests motivating my study, imposed itself on the participants, becoming at times at odds with the communication norms they preferred and knew best. Other times, of course, the script receded as conversations meandered into stories, jokes, jibes, and other tangents during which I tried to listen closely for the lessons about literacy that they offered. In any case, one of the great advantages of conducting autobiographical interviews at the end of the twentieth century was the ubiquitous models of the interview format available through television, radio, and print, making the roles of interviewer and interviewee not quite so strange for either party. Nevertheless, the methodological limitations I mention as well as the ones I fail to notice myself are indelibly present in (and absent from!) this presentation, there (and not there) for the discriminating reader to weigh against my claims.<sup>14</sup>

A few more deliberate limitations must be noted. First, although reading development is not ignored in this study, the central focus is on writing and learning to write. One reason is simply to help to redress the neglect of the social history of writing in comparison to reading. As

Michael Halloran has observed, "Writing has been a virtually invisible topic in the material history of modern culture."<sup>15</sup> I have been amazed throughout the process of researching for this book at how invisible writing remains as a researched phenomenon in economics, history of education, and communication studies.<sup>16</sup> Although the situation is improving, much more is left to be known about the practices, meanings, and values of writing for ordinary citizens. A focus on writing is especially pertinent now because the pressure to write is perhaps the main new feature of literacy to have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a second wave, one might say, of the mass (reading) literacy achieved for many groups by the second half of the nineteenth century.

Second, I decided early on not to ask participants to show me their writing. Partly this was a practical matter, for most of the writing done by ordinary people is by nature transitory, consumed, discarded. Most of the texts people recalled no longer existed anyway. Partly this was a philosophical matter, for too much of our understanding about literacy and writing development is based on the analysis of texts, and this study is meant to emphasize other dimensions. Partly, too, this was a personal matter, a reluctance to force into my relationship with the participants the long shadow of the teacher ready to uncover shameful inadequacies of expression. As the interviews demonstrated, the disapproving teacher looms large enough still in many people's memories and was best, I thought, left alone. In several cases, people spontaneously offered me examples of their writing, sometimes journals, letters, poems and fiction, autobiographies, old school reports, or professional projects and publications. But they were never solicited.

Finally, I steered away in the interviews and certainly in the write-ups from probes and disclosures of most personal matters. These excisions from the presentation, even when bits of the shape of literacy learning might have been cut along with them, were motivated by a desire not to hurt or embarrass the people who helped me so much in this project. I hope I have succeeded.

A note about transcriptions: All quotations from the interviews have been edited into standard written English with hesitations, misstarts, and pauses eliminated. Such editing indeed washes out the dialectical diversity of the people I spoke with. However, not trained as a linguist, I lacked the skill to transcribe accurately the range of regional accents and dialects that I heard. Although the racism of our society often invites researchers to hear and inscribe aspects of the most stigmatized dialects (for instance, Ebonics or the "broken" English of second-language speakers), the speech of the nonstigmatized is not so closely scrutinized for its deviations

from the accepted standard. It is out of a sense of evenhandedness, then, that I have converted all the speech that I quote into standard edited English. Dropping the hesitations and misstarts risks loss of nuance, but in each case I listened carefully to the contextual meaning of passages I have chosen to quote to be sure that such editing would not flagrantly distort meaning as I understood it. What is gained by these decisions, I hope, is greater clarity and efficiency for the reader.

### The Setting of the Study

This study involved 80 people ranging in age at the time of the interviews from 98 years old to 10. All the participants were living in south central Wisconsin, virtually all of them in the county surrounding the university that employs me. This area, whose population numbered more than 367,000 at the time of the 1990 census, is diverse geographically and economically. Nearly three fourths of the county is still farmland (although in the late 1990s it was being lost quickly to commercial and residential development), and the county has often been referred to as the dairy capital of the United States. Small towns provide commercial hubs for rural areas, yet the county also embraces a dense urban area around the state capital, which is also home to a large public university. Sprawling suburban communities ring the capital. State government and the university are leading employers, followed by the medical industry, insurance, food processing, and light manufacturing. By the mid-1990s, retail shops, restaurants, and other services were burgeoning. Settled originally by the Fox, Sauk, and Ho-Chunk, the area was populated by the midnineteenth century by German and Norwegian immigrants attracted to the rich farmland. It remains today an area with high concentrations of European Americans in both rural and urban areas. Small but growing populations of African, Mexican, and Asian Americans join a few Native Americans (about 1% of the population) and newly arrived immigrants from Europe, Asia, Mexico, and Central America to round out the ethnic profile. Seventy percent of the county's residents were born in Wisconsin. At the time of the study, unemployment in the county was below the national average and level of schooling above it, yet ethnic disparities in income and education achievement were significant. Although 10% of the population overall was living below the poverty line, the proportion grew to close to 33% among residents of color, most of them working poor.<sup>17</sup>

Originally, this study was to draw participants who would represent the 1990 U.S. census profile of the county in terms of ethnicity, education

level, occupation, and region of birth. But as interviewing progressed and the vicissitudes of conducting the study set in, it became harder – and of less interest, frankly – to maintain this goal. I sought and found a group of people who, overall, were diverse in terms of ethnicity, income, education, occupation, religion, and experience. Fifty-four of the people were European American, 16 African American, 4 Mexican American, 2 Native American, 2 of Asian descent, and 2 of Middle Eastern descent. Eleven grew up in households where languages other than English were spoken and, in some cases, written and read. Twenty-two of the participants had been born and raised in the county where the study was conducted. Another 15 had been born and raised in other parts of Wisconsin. The rest grew up out of state, in the east, west, southwest, west, and other parts of the Midwest. Four were foreign born, although schooled as children in the United States (a requirement I imposed in my selection). Fifty of the participants grew up in rural areas or small towns; 20 were raised in metropolitan areas; the rest, in big cities. Ten of the participants had fewer than 12 years of schooling. Twenty-five had earned high school diplomas or their equivalent. Twenty-three had some years of post-secondary education, with 22 attaining a bachelor's degree or more.

It is through the life circumstances of the people interviewed for this study, about which much more will be said later, that a better sense of this society will emerge. Many of the elderly European Americans I interviewed had been raised on small, family-owned farms in the Midwest and had attended one or two-room country schools. Now retired from jobs in sales, clerical work, transportation, or dairy production, they were living in area retirement centers or public housing projects or nursing homes, attracted to the county by its good health care and transportation systems. Many of the older African Americans I interviewed belonged to families who had migrated to the upper Midwest from Southern sharecropping communities during and after World War II, to work for the railroad or the auto industry and later for the post office, government services, public utilities, and business. Other African Americans, typically younger and poorer, arrived in the 1980s or 1990s to escape violence and political neglect in nearby big cities, bringing their school-aged children and finding work in low-paid service positions. Many Mexican Americans in the area arrived originally as farm workers or children of farm workers, up in the summer from Texas border towns, eventually to settle in year-round with jobs in canneries or in small family businesses. Other Mexican Americans arrived to attend the university and decided to stay. The diaspora following the Vietnam War brought southeast Asians into diverse occupations in the area. A large

bulk of the participants arrived from various parts of the country to study or work at the university or to take positions in the thriving professional and technical economy. All in all, participants in this study made their living as postal workers, farm laborers, factory workers, bus drivers, social workers, secretaries, dairy farmers, journalists, educators, classroom aides, domestics, executives, lawyers, hairdressers, homemakers, technicians, small-business owners, nurses and nurses' aides, salespeople, government workers, and more. Thirteen interviewees were students, attending area public or parochial schools, small local colleges, or the university. Twelve participants lived in households that fell into the government category of low income.

Thus, this study offers a profile that cannot be said to be statistically representative of any population. But I recognized early on that I could not include all of America's voices nor did I wish to force participants in this study to stand for the entire ethnic group, region, or occupation from which they came. By matters of feasibility, this study bears a regional bias toward the conditions in the county where I live and work, toward the experiences of its natives and the people who have been drawn there since early in the twentieth century. Yet I take heart from Bertaux's observation that any life is representative "not as the result of statistical practices but because ... its social determinations simply are shared by many others as a matter of reality."<sup>18</sup> So, as a matter of reality – if not proper proportion – the 80 lives represented here articulate a vast range of literacy learning over the twentieth century in America.

This is also to say that this study accounts for the details reported in the life stories of 80 particular individuals. Consequently, many aspects of the history of literacy in the twentieth century are missing from this book – because they either did not touch the lives of the individuals studied here or failed to arise as topics during the interviews. A different interviewer, a different setting, and different questions all might have yielded dimensions of literacy learning other than those with which I work here. This research began with individuals and not with the institutions around which literacy instruction is typically organized. For instance, I did not approach for systematic study any adult basic education programs, workplace literacy programs, Headstart, or family literacy programs. Though all of these are active initiatives in the region that I studied, the stories of these agencies are not told here. Neither does this study treat the official histories of school curriculums or teaching methods, except insofar as they were recalled and remarked on in interviews. In part because curricular and institutional histories already exist in the scholarship and because most contemporary literacy research is based in organized, mostly

instructional settings, this study takes a different tack. As a result, it omits sites within its broad geographical setting where literacy learning goes on and where a great deal of human resources are concentrated in that effort. It is useful to remember, however, that literacy programs, chronically underfunded in the United States, still engage only small numbers of the population. Further, virtually all of the people I interviewed made multiple points of contact over the course of their lives with a wide array of institutional agents – some traditionally associated with literacy and many that are not – and these contacts are explored through the context of the individual history. The claim, however, is never to comprehensiveness. Indeed, I have not even been able to be comprehensive with the individual histories I have collected. Many angles, major and minor, have been let go – at least for now. What is here, though, is as true as I can get it to what I think is of widest public importance.

Volunteers for the study were recruited through nursing homes, retirement, and senior citizen centers, unions, schools, social service, community and housing agencies, professional organizations, churches and synagogues, and through networks of associates and friends. In some cases, intermediaries approached potential participants and then I followed up with phone requests. Almost all of the interviews were conducted in private homes; a few were conducted in workplaces and hospital rooms. Interviews lasted between one and three hours; occasionally, I followed up interviews with additional phone queries. In some cases, I made personal monetary donations to nonprofit organizations that assisted me and in several cases provided some favors and reciprocal services for participants. All interviews were tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. Throughout the study, pseudonyms replace personal names, locations, and other potential cues to the identity of the participants.

The following section continues to explain the conceptual and analytical approach of the study.

### **The Analytical Framework: Sponsors of Literacy**

In his sweeping history of adult learning in the United States, Joseph Kett described the intellectual atmosphere available to young apprentices who worked in the small, decentralized print shops of antebellum America. Because printers also were the solicitors and editors of what they published, their workshops served as lively incubators for literacy and political discourse. By the midnineteenth century, however, this opportunity faded when the invention of the steam press reorganized the economy of the

print industry. Steam presses were so expensive that they required capital outlays beyond the means of many printers. As a result, print jobs were outsourced, the processes of editing and printing were split, and, in tight competition, print apprentices became low-paid mechanics with no more access to the multiskilled environment of the craft shop.<sup>19</sup> Although this shift in working conditions may be evidence of the deskilling of workers induced by the Industrial Revolution,<sup>20</sup> it also offers a site for reflecting on the dynamic sources of literacy and literacy learning. The reading and writing skills of print apprentices in this period were an achievement not simply of teachers and learners or of the discourse practices of the printer community. Rather, these skills existed vulnerably, contingently within an economic moment. The pre-steam press economy enabled some of the most basic aspects of the apprentices' literacy, especially their access to material production and the public meaning or worth of their skills. Paradoxically, even as the steam-powered penny press made print more accessible (by making publishing more profitable), it brought an end to a particular form of literacy sponsorship and a drop in literacy potential.

Kett's study, which focused on the competition among providers of education in the United States, helped me to formulate an analytical approach to literacy learning that I came to call sponsors of literacy. As I suggested earlier, literacy looms as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth century: a lubricant for consumer desire, a means for integrating corporate markets, a foundation for the deployment of weapons and other technology, a raw material in the mass production of information. As ordinary citizens have been compelled into these economies, their reading and writing skills have grown sharply more central to the everyday trade of information and goods as well as to the pursuit of education, employment, civil rights, and status. At the same time, people's literate skills have grown vulnerable to unprecedented turbulence in their economic value, as conditions, forms, and standards of literacy achievement seem to shift with almost every new generation of learners. In my analysis of the life histories, I sought ways to understand the vicissitudes of individual literacy development in relationship to the large-scale economic forces that set the routes and determine the worldly worth of that literacy.

My own field of writing studies has had much to say about individual literacy development. Especially in the last quarter of the twentieth century, we have theorized, researched, critiqued, debated, and sometimes even managed to enhance the literacy potentials of ordinary citizens as they have tried to cope with life as they find it. Less easily and certainly less steadily have we been able to relate what we see, study, and do to these

larger contexts of profit making and competition. This even as we recognize that the most pressing issues we deal with – tightening associations between literacy skill and social viability, the breakneck pace of change in communications technology, persistent inequities in access and reward – all relate to structural conditions in literacy's bigger picture. When economic forces are addressed in our work, they appear primarily as generalities: contexts, determinants, motivators, barriers, touchstones. But rarely are they systematically related to the local conditions and embodied moments of literacy learning that occupy so many of us on a daily basis.<sup>21</sup>

This study does not presume to overcome the analytical failure completely. But it does offer a conceptual approach that begins to connect literacy as an individual development to literacy as an economic development, at least as the two have played out over the last century. The approach is through what I call sponsors of literacy. Sponsors, as I have come to think of them, are any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy – and gain advantage by it in some way. Just as the ages of radio and television accustomed us to having programs brought to us by various commercial sponsors, it is useful to think about who or what underwrites occasions of literacy learning and use. Although the interests of the sponsor and the sponsored do not have to converge (and, in fact, may conflict), sponsors nevertheless set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty. Sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to – and through – individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited.<sup>22</sup> Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes.

Intuitively, *sponsors* seemed a fitting term for the figures who turned up most typically in people's memories of literacy learning: older relatives, teachers, religious leaders, supervisors, military officers, librarians, friends, editors, influential authors. Sponsors, as we ordinarily think of them, are powerful figures who bankroll events or smooth the way for initiates. Usually richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored, sponsors nevertheless enter a reciprocal relationship with those they underwrite. They lend their resources or credibility to the sponsored but also stand to gain benefits from their success, whether by direct repayment or, indirectly, by credit of association. *Sponsors* also proved an appealing term in my analysis because of all the commercial references that appeared in these twentieth-century accounts – the

magazines, peddled encyclopedias, essay contests, radio and television programs, toys, fan clubs, writing tools, and so on, from which so much experience with literacy was derived. As the twentieth century turned the abilities to read and write into widely exploitable resources, commercial sponsorship abounded.

In whatever form, sponsors deliver the ideological freight that must be borne for access to what they have. Of course, the sponsored can be oblivious to or innovative with this ideological burden. Like Little Leaguers who wear the logo of a local insurance agency on their uniforms, not out of a concern for enhancing the agency's image but as a means for getting to play ball, people throughout history have acquired literacy pragmatically under the banner of others' causes. In the days before free public schooling in England, Protestant Sunday schools warily offered basic reading instruction to working-class families as part of evangelical duty. To the horror of many in the church sponsorship, these families insistently, sometimes riotously demanded of their Sunday schools more instruction, including in writing and math, because it provided means for upward mobility.<sup>23</sup> Through the sponsorship of Baptist and Methodist ministries, African Americans in slavery taught each other to understand the Bible in subversively liberatory ways. Under a conservative regime, they developed forms of critical literacy that sustained religious, educational, and political movements both before and after emancipation.<sup>24</sup> Most of the time, however, literacy takes its shape from the interests of its sponsors. And, as we will see throughout this book, obligations toward one's sponsors run deep, affecting what, when, why, and how people write and read.

The concept of sponsors helps to explain, then, a range of human relationships and ideological pressures that turn up at the scenes of literacy learning – from benign sharing between adults and youths to euphemistic coercions in schools and workplaces to the most notorious impositions and deprivations by church or state. It also is a concept useful for tracking literacy's materiel: the things that accompany writing and reading and the ways they are manufactured and distributed. *Sponsorship* as a sociological term is even more broadly suggestive for thinking about economies of literacy development. Studies of patronage in Europe and *compadrazgo* in the Americas show how patron–client relationships in the past grew up around the need to manage scarce resources and promote political stability.<sup>25</sup> Pragmatic, instrumental, ambivalent, patron–client relationships integrated otherwise antagonistic social classes into relationships of mutual, albeit unequal, dependencies. Loaning land, money, protection, and other favors allowed the politically powerful to extend their influence and justify their exploitation of clients. Clients traded their labor and def-

erence for access to opportunities for themselves or their children and for leverage needed to improve their social standing. Especially under conquest in Latin America, *compadrazgo* reintegrated native societies badly fragmented by the diseases and other disruptions that followed foreign invasions. At the same time, this system was susceptible to its own stresses, especially when patrons became clients themselves of still more centralized or distant overlords, with all the shifts in loyalty and perspective that entailed.<sup>26</sup>

In raising this association with formal systems of patronage, I do not wish to overlook the very different economic, political, and education systems within which U.S. literacy has developed. But where we find the sponsoring of literacy, it will be useful to look for its function within larger political and economic arenas. Literacy is a valued commodity in the U.S. economy, a key resource in gaining profit and edge. This value helps to explain, of course, the length people will go to secure literacy for themselves or their children. But it also explains why the powerful work so persistently to conscript and ration the resource of literacy. The competition to harness literacy, to manage, measure, teach, and exploit it, intensified throughout the twentieth century. It is vital to pay attention to this development because it largely sets the terms for individuals' encounters with literacy. This competition shapes the incentives and barriers (including uneven distributions of opportunity) that greet literacy learners in any particular time and place. It is this competition that has made access to the right kinds of literacy sponsors so crucial for political and economic well-being. And it also has spurred the rapid, complex changes that now make the pursuit of literacy feel so turbulent and precarious for so many.

Each of the following chapters applies the analytical concept of the sponsor to life-history accounts to address fundamental questions about literacy learning in the twentieth century: How do regional economic transformations change the conditions for literacy learning for people in that place? What do sharply rising standards for literacy feel like in the lives of ordinary Americans? How is literacy passed across generations under conditions of rapid social change? What barriers and opportunities in social structures matter to literacy learning at the current time? In several chapters, I have chosen to concentrate on extended exemplar cases to provide detailed examination of the material and ideological conditions that carry potential answers to these questions. Where exemplar cases are used, they have been chosen for the clarity and robustness with which they illustrate findings from the larger body of life accounts. In other chapters, the data have been sliced more thickly, across groups and at times across the entire set of interviews. Although in the end it has been

necessary to focus in depth on only a few of the many interviews that I collected, it was only by collecting and analyzing many interviews (indeed, I wish there could have been more) that I could find the recurrent patterns and themes that I here illustrate with fewer, in-depth cases.

Chapter 1, *Literacy, Opportunity, and Economic Change*, treats literacy learning in relationship to regional economic restructuring over a 60-year period. The chapter follows the lifelong literacy experiences of two women born and raised on small, family-owned dairy farms, one at the beginning of the twentieth century and one near the end. Their literacy learning is set within the growing intrusions of corporate agribusiness into dairy communities, rising poverty in rural communities, and the takeover of former farmland by urban and suburban interests. The chapter considers how affiliations with dominant and minority economies, including gender expectations within those economies, affect paths for literacy learning. As economies rise and fall in salience, size, or value, the literacy opportunities of people linked to those economies also rise and fall, along with their overall potential to trade on that literacy.

Chapter 2, *Literacy and Illiteracy in Documentary America*, inquires into the meanings of sharply rising standards for literacy: how these standards arrive in people's lives and how people respond to them. In the twentieth century, as print became more and more useful for selling products, integrating systems, managing bureaucracies, waging war, and so on, sponsors of literacy proliferated as did the ferocity of their competitions. Caught up in these competitions, more and more Americans felt the demand to do more and more things with their literacy. The chapter investigates patterns of sponsorship in the literacy learning of two adult men during 20 critical years of their lives. One, an auto worker turned union representative, struggled to adjust to an increasingly legalistic context in which union bargaining and grievance proceedings occurred. In this transition, his skills as a debater and negotiator were eclipsed by the growing importance of written documents within union-management competitions. The second man, a former sharecropper growing up in the jaws of racism, entered prison in the 1970s unable to read or write. He began a gradual project of self-rescue within the context of a modernizing prison. In synchronization with a series of legal rulings that expanded prisoner rights and access to legal knowledge, he left prison a literate man. In both cases, analysis focuses on competitions within what Edward Stevens has called "advanced contractarian society" as it served to sponsor literacy learning in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup>

Chapter 3, *Accumulating Literacy: How Four Generations of One American Family Learned to Write*, revisits the same regional landscape

as is studied in Chapter 1. However, here, the story is told through the perspective of four consecutive generations of the May family, all of whom lived within a 20-mile radius of one another in a dynamically developing county in Wisconsin. The chapter follows the family as it moves, with the nation overall, from the village to the city to suburbia, from farming to manufacturing to a high-tech, service economy. The chapter looks at how reading and writing are passed from one generation to the next, and how the larger economic and cultural transformations in which the family is engaged affect that process. The Depression, World War II, the expansion of educational opportunities, the arrival of mass media, and the tightening association between social viability and literate skill are all considered through the life experiences of the May family. The chapter demonstrates how histories of economic competition in which families have been engaged supply many of the resources through which later generations encounter literacy. However, as economic change accelerates, the time span shrinks in which these resources remain durable and relevant. The challenges to literacy learning and life chances are explored.

Chapter 4, "The Power of It": *Sponsors of Literacy in African American Lives*, looks at the experiences of people whose literacy expanded dramatically during a period in which they were experiencing systematic exclusion from educational and economic opportunity. Throughout the twentieth century, the literacy development of African American citizens was rarely figured into the needs of the nation's changing economy, and even when African Americans attained high-level literacy, the worth of that literacy was usually honored only within the African American community itself. How does literacy develop in the absence of broad economic sponsorship and subsidy? This chapter looks at how self-help systems developed by African Americans to survive slavery and legal segregation worked during the twentieth century to sponsor literacy learning. The chapter considers specifically the role of the African American church, African American educators, and the African American-oriented media as they appeared as sponsors of literacy in the lives of 16 individuals born between the 1910s and the 1970s. These traditional cultural agents formed the deep wells that fed a steady rise in literacy and education rates among African Americans. The chapter ends by tracing these major sponsorship networks as they converged in the writing development of one man during nearly 50 years of experience.

Chapter 5, *The Sacred and the Profane: Reading versus Writing in Popular Memory*, treats all 80 life histories to consider some surprising differences in the cultural contexts in which people remembered learning to read versus learning to write. Although reading appears as a deeply

sanctioned activity in most families and communities, writing is a more ambivalently encouraged enterprise and is fraught, more than reading, with secrecy, punishment, and surveillance. Reasons for these discrepancies are sought both in the reconstructed memories of the people interviewed and in the different cultural and economic traditions by which reading and writing have developed in America. The implications of these legacies are explored in light of the central role that writing is coming to occupy in work and social relations at the start of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 6, *The Means of Production: Literacy and Stratification at the Twenty-First Century*, addresses issues of literacy and social equity. It follows the literacy learning in the lives of two young people who were born in the same year, 1969. The chapter asks how, despite ostensible democracy in educational chances, stratification of opportunity continues to organize access and reward in literacy learning. The chapter looks behind the static socioeconomic factors that typically explain differential outcomes in literacy achievement (i.e., family income, race, and education). It goes more deeply into the patterns of literacy sponsorship that lie behind those profiles. The two young people are linked to very different economic histories, which, in the same place at the same time, supply different access routes, different degrees of sponsoring power, and different scales of monetary worth to the reading and writing practices they learn. This chapter also explores the emerging prominence of mass media and computer technology in the lives of young learners as well the multicultural and ideologically complex forms of literacy that many Americans practice. This chapter considers how schools and other interested parties could mount more inventive methods for intervening, as sponsors, to equalize chances and rewards for literacy learning.

The Conclusion, *Literacy in American Lives*, wraps up the inquiry, revisiting the main findings across focus topics. The chapter argues that contemporary literacy learning is caught up in unprecedented transformations in the role of literacy in modern technological societies. Through most of its history, literacy was associated with the conservative interests of central authorities, principally church and state. Over the last century, however, literacy and its spinoffs have become most associated with revolutions in communication technologies, diversification of forms and formats, destabilization of knowledge, and decentralization of authority. It is in and through these conditions that writing and reading are now learned. The chapter ends with an exploration of the implications of this shift for schools and other instructional sponsors of literacy.

## LITERACY, OPPORTUNITY, AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

The foundation of national wealth is really people – the human capital represented by their knowledge, skills, organizations, and motivations. Just as the primary assets of a modern corporation leave the workplace each night to go home for dinner, so the income-generating assets of a nation are the knowledge and skills of its workers – not its industrial plants or natural resources. As the economies of developed nations move further into the post-industrial era, human capital plays an ever more important role in their progress. As the society becomes more complex, the amount of education and knowledge needed to make a productive contribution to the economy becomes greater [Johnson & Packer, 1987, p. 16].

With this policy blueprint, called *Workforce 2000*, the U.S. Department of Labor bluntly exposed the way that literacy ability, corporate profitability, and national productivity have all become entangled. At one time, American workers had value for their capacity to transform raw materials into consumable goods. But by the start of the twenty-first century, they had become the raw material itself. The nature of work in the United States puts a premium on the ability to traffic in symbols generally and in verbal symbols particularly, as print and print-based technologies have penetrated into virtually all aspects of money making. In an information economy, reading and writing serve as input, output, and conduit for producing profit and winning economic advantage. Systematic information has replaced direct experience as the basis for knowledge making and decision making, turning texts into the principle tools and literacy into the principle craft of the information economy.<sup>1</sup> If the ability to read and

**Civic or Political Writing****Influential People**

Memories of people who had a hand in one's learning to write or read

**Influential Events**

Significant events in the process of learning to write

**Purposes for Writing and Reading Overall****Values**

Relative importance of writing and reading

Motivations

Consequences

**Current Uses of Reading and Writing**

All reading and writing done in the six months prior to the interview

**Sense of Literacy Learning**

Interviewee's own sense of how he or she learned to read and write

Sense of how people in general learn to read and write

**NOTES****Introduction: The Pursuit of Literacy**

<sup>1</sup> Scribner and Cole (1981) set out one of the most influential formulations of literacy as a contextualized social practice. Through a series of painstaking empirical studies conducted among the Vai of Liberia, Scribner and Cole showed how through a variety of uses and contextual conditions, literacy yields a variety of cognitive preferences and skills. Their study stood in critique of widely held beliefs (developed largely out of anthropological and classical treatments of oral-literate contrasts) that characterized literacy as a monolithic technology bringing predictable cognitive consequences for people who took it up. Scribner and Cole showed that what literacy does to people depends on what people do with literacy. Another important advocate of contextualized approaches to literacy is Brian Street (1984), who emphasized the ideological aspects that context brings to literacy. For an expert application of this approach in ethnographic research, see Besnier (1995), and for broad, useful summaries, Collins (1995) and Barton (1994). Heath (1983) is a classic study of the implications of literacy in context for educational justice. For a more historically oriented treatment of literacy as practice, see Gere (1997).

<sup>2</sup> It would be fair to say that most ethnography-oriented studies of the social contexts of literacy treat context largely as a present-tense "scenic" setting. Many provide inventories of literacy practices in use by families, schools, groups, or communities, often with a focus on adult-child interactions. See, for instance, work by Heath (1983); Purcell-Gates (1995); Taylor (1985); Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988); and Schieffelin and Gilmore (1984). For intergenerational and life span perspectives, see Gadsden (1992, 1997) and Donehower (1997).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the famous study *A Nation at Risk* (1983), which is frequently credited with setting off the most recent alarms about student achievement in

basic skill. Along related lines is Johnston and Packer (1987). Calls in the late 1990s by the Clinton administration to have all children reading by third grade is a clear manifestation of concern about future American workers and their productivity in the new economy, as is the growing national standards movement, sometimes called the accountability movement. For more on the implications of these pressures, see the Conclusion. For a somewhat dated but still useful historical perspectives on these matters, see Resnick and Resnick (1977).

<sup>4</sup> In contemplating literacy as a resource, I find literal, material definitions quite useful because they tend to match the way that I found people treat their own literacy, often in a very practical and instrumental way. In the field of accounting, for instance, *assets* have been defined by Smith and Parr (1989) as “probable economic benefits” (42). Literacy as a potential benefit, or what Smith and Parr would call an “intangible asset,” can behave in a similar way. Smith and Parr noted that the value of assets can be affected both by use and by changes and developments occurring in other places. They wrote: “Assets of an entity are changed both by its transactions and activities and by events that happen to it... An entity’s assets or their value may be increased or decreased by other events ... that may be ... beyond the control of the entity” (p. 43). This fluctuation in the value of literacy affected many of the lives I studied and was often an instigation for further literacy learning.

<sup>5</sup> Graff’s definitive *The Literacy Myth* (1979) decimates the assumptions that literacy leads to upward mobility and that illiteracy is the cause of downward mobility. Looking at census data from Canadian cities in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Graff demonstrated that discrimination by race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and class was far more determining of chances for upward mobility than was literacy, an analysis that would still pertain in North American societies. Yet the literacy myth persists, most potently around social issues like crime and welfare. There is a widespread belief, for instance, that illiteracy causes poverty or criminality, for instance, or that literate women are better mothers than illiterate ones.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the concept of cultural capital and its role in stratifying access to and benefits from education, see Bourdieu and Passeron (1977). Interestingly, in later writings Bourdieu suggested that a more accurate term would be *informational capital* (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Although literate resources would clearly fall under Bourdieu’s broad notion of capital, he also saw that the technology of print could rearrange the powers of cultural capital by moving them from memory to text (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 125). Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker (1986) developed the notion of human capital into a general theory of economic activity based on investments in and rewards for human competence.

<sup>7</sup> Castells (1989) observed: “The main source of productivity [in the information society] is the capacity to generate and process new information, itself dependent upon the symbolic manipulating ability of labor” (p. 351).

<sup>8</sup> See especially the work of Brian Street (1984, 1993, 1995) for useful conceptions of what is often called critical literacy studies. Also see Street and Besnier (1994).

<sup>9</sup> Also see Bertaux and Thompson (1997). Social structure and social change are at the heart of the investigations of these three researchers. Individual cases are

valued for what they can reveal about economic and social relationships. For weaknesses in this approach, see the Popular Memory Group’s (1982) critique of Thompson’s *The Voice of the Past* (1988), which they fault for not attending to the cultural constructions involved in life-story interviewing and life stories themselves, for disguising premises of researcher and researched in “the empirical fact.” My study, in fact, is limited in the same way.

<sup>10</sup> Lummis, 1987, page 108.

<sup>11</sup> Ryder, 1965, page 844. Ryder captured the value of this perspective for the study of literacy learning when he wrote that “the principal motor of contemporary social change is technological innovation. It pervades the other substructures of society and forces them into accommodation” (p. 851).

<sup>12</sup> Bertaux, 1981, page 130.

<sup>13</sup> Briggs’s (1986) book is a useful reminder that oral history interviews are systematically related to the present (especially the ongoing demands of the interview itself) as to the past. He also called for more attention to the what he called the “metacommunicative repertoires” of the social groups from which interviewees come, especially so that the interviewer can learn the lessons offered in a particular exchange.

<sup>14</sup> For additional psychological treatments of autobiographical memory, see the collection by Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen, and Betz (1996).

<sup>15</sup> Halloran, 1990, page 155.

<sup>16</sup> More attention needs to be paid to the fact that many reading assessments require students to write out their responses to reading as proof of comprehension. The intermingling of writing ability with reading ability in these settings is not usually addressed. The National Assessment of Educational Progress in Reading, for instance, judges reading comprehension on the basis of students’ written answers.

<sup>17</sup> As this book was going to press, this area of Wisconsin was, like many parts of the country, experiencing unprecedented levels of employment. Unemployment had fallen to under 2% by the late 1990s.

<sup>18</sup> Bertaux, 1981, page 134.

<sup>19</sup> Kett, 1994, pages 67–70.

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas and Nicholas (1992).

<sup>21</sup> Three of the keenest and most eloquent observers of economic impacts on writing and teaching and learning have been Faigley (1999), Miller (1991), and Spellmeyer (1996).

<sup>22</sup> For a more positive treatment of sponsors, see Goldblatt (1994), who explored the power of institutions to authorize writers.

<sup>23</sup> Laqueur (1976, p. 124) provided a vivid account of a street demonstration in Bolton, England, in 1834 by a “pro-writing” faction of Sunday school students and their teachers. This faction demanded that writing instruction continue to be provided on Sundays, something that opponents of secular instruction on the Sabbath were trying to reverse. The legacies of this period on contemporary reading and writing are explored in Chapter 5.

<sup>24</sup> See Cornelius's (1991) absorbing study, which provides ample evidence of how competing interests – economic, political, and religious – set the conditions for literacy and illiteracy among African Americans in slavery.

<sup>25</sup> Thanks to Ann Egan-Robertson for suggesting patronage as a useful model for thinking about literacy and sponsorship. See Bourne (1986), Hortsman and Kurtz (1978), and Lynch (1986).

<sup>26</sup> Hortsman and Kurtz, 1978, pages 13–14.

<sup>27</sup> Stevens (1988) drew on Rawls's (1971) contractarian theory of social justice to explore how judicial attitudes toward illiterates shifted as the society moved more and more to relations of formal obligation and contract. Stevens argued that the rights of illiterates suffer because their ability to exercise those rights is hampered by the rising value and authority of documents. For more on this matter, see Chapter 2.

### Chapter 1. Literacy, Opportunity, and Economic Change

<sup>1</sup> In characterizing the economy this way, I recognize that many jobs do not require (and do not reward) advanced literacy skills of workers. However, I do want to emphasize that the prominence of symbol-wielding activity both in the private sector and the public sector that manages it affects all people in every place, whether they are directly engaged in these activities or not.

<sup>2</sup> For thoughts on formal knowledge as an economic resource, see Castells (1989), Drucker (1969), and Machlup (1980). Literacy researchers who have been paying attention to the impact of economic change on literacy include Gee, Hull, and Lankshear (1996); Gowen (1992); Hull (1997); Purcell-Gates (1995); Stuckey (1991); and Taylor (1996).

<sup>3</sup> Lockridge (1974) is an early and innovative study using signature rates to recover the rates and social impact of literacy in colonial New England. For one of many corrections and amplifications of Lockridge's study, see Perlmann and Shirley (1991).

<sup>4</sup> There is a vast literature on the history of mass literacy, especially its early growth. Graff's magisterial history (1986) is a good place to start. For treatments of the push and pull of literacy, see particularly Cressy (1980) and Vincent (1989), a provocative study that takes a critical look at the impact of literacy on working-class relations and the dynamics of upward mobility. I have been especially partial to studies of literacy that are grounded in material conditions and treat the literacy of ordinary people. See, for instance, Chartier (1987, 1989), Houston (1988), and Hurt (1972). Other good studies that focus on the ideological impact of literacy include, for instance, King (1994) and, for very early developments, Stock (1983). For relationship of literacy to recent American education, see Cremin (1988).

<sup>5</sup> For general treatments of the commercial and cultural stimulations of early printing, see Eisenstein (1979) and Davis's (1981) wonderful chapter, "Printing and the People," in Graff. For treatments of the American condition, Kaestle, Damon-Moore, Stedman, Tinsley, & Trollinger (1991), especially Chapters 2 and 5.

<sup>6</sup> In a study of popular literacy in Victorian England, Mitch (1992) showed that despite widespread literacy in the midnineteenth century, no more than 5% of the male work force and 3% of the female work force were in occupations that strictly required literacy (p. 14), although just over one half of male workers and two thirds of female workers were in occupations in which literacy was at least possibly an asset (p. 20). This study captured a period in which occupations were increasingly changing to make use of literacy. Drucker (1969, p. 284) also suggested that the lengthening of formal schooling in American in a sense forced the development of an information economy because educated people became unfit for anything but knowledge work.

<sup>7</sup> The best study of literacy and region that I know of is Gilmore (1989), a methodologically stunning treatment of literacy in the Connecticut River valley in the decades following the Revolutionary War. For other thoughtful methodological approaches, see Houston (1985). For comparative looks at literacy development in different economic settings, see Stephens (1987), and at vicissitudes of literacy in the face of political and social disorder, see Gallman (1988) and Gallego (1991). For general historical treatments of schooling and region, see Kaestle (1983), especially Chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> For sources of inequity by region and within regions in midtwentieth century, see Ginzberg and Bray's (1953) fascinating study of illiteracy and the military draft in World War II. Grubb (1987, 1990, 1992) has written a number of interesting articles treating literacy in terms of supply and demand and the cost to families of providing literacy for their children. For more on this issue, see Chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> For a very interesting cost-benefit analysis of literacy acquisition as well as the development of family strategies for literacy and schooling, see Mitch (1992). Only one of the people that I interviewed reporting losing his literacy skills as a result of nonuse. The report was from a man who was born in rural Wisconsin in 1942 and graduated from high school in 1960. A heavy-equipment operator for his entire adult life, the man said, "I don't do enough writing. I got to the point where I'm a very slow writer and getting the words wrong because I don't do that much writing. I've found even some of the simplest words will trip me up. I'll write something down and go back and say, 'Boy, that's not spelled right. You should know that, but you don't.'"

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the high drop-out rate in adult basic education classes could be explained by the deflation in the value of basic literacy, both as it spread to virtually all workers and as the advantages of advanced skills sharpened. The economic value of basic literacy (especially on top of the suppressed value of minimum wages) may not be worth the high investment of time and effort. On another front, many American workers are piling up obsolete knowledge and skills related to obsolete communication technologies and computer software.

<sup>11</sup> Although I use pseudonyms here, it is true that the farm journal that employed Martha Day and the gas station that employed Barbara Hunt both bore the same name. That small detail – which spoke so much about the economic changes that devastated family farming – inspired my decision to look more closely at the parallels and differences in the lives of these two women.