

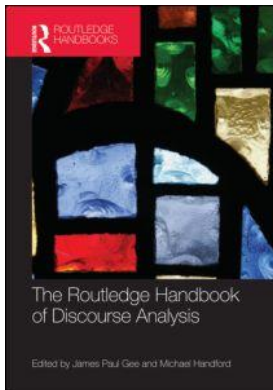
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### **Discourse and “the New Literacy Studies”**

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# Part IV

## Educational applications

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# Discourse and “the New Literacy Studies”

*James Paul Gee*

## The New Literacy Studies and the New Literacies Studies

The new literacy studies (hereafter “NLS”) is a name that arose “after the fact.” In the 1980s a number of scholars from different disciplines (see citations below, in the next section) began to critique the traditional view of literacy as “the ability to read and write” (a largely individual and mental phenomenon) and to argue for a social and cultural approach to literacy. In the late 1980s I referred to this work, in which I was myself engaged, as “the New Literacy Studies” (Gee, 1989), because I believed that the work shared some common themes and was converging on a new interdisciplinary field of study. The people I included under this label did not necessarily see themselves at the time as being in the same “movement.” Brian Street, one of the earliest and leading scholars in the NLS, has since done more than anyone to institutionalize the NLS and to get it recognized as a consistent approach to literacy studies (Street, 1997, 2003, 2005).

The NLS is today accompanied by a related, but different movement, with a name that sounds very close to the NLS: the new literacies studies (Lankshear, 1997; Gee, 2004; Lankshear and Knobel, 2006, 2007). The NLS was about a new approach to print literacy and the oral language practices that surrounded it. The new literacies studies is about new “literacies” involving digital media or popular-culture practices, and thus it goes beyond print literacy. However, the NLS itself stressed the plurality of literacy in terms of different socially and culturally defined practices connected to print (different “literacies”). With such a stress on multiplicity, it is natural that people have extended the plurality of literacy practices to practices involving technologies other than print (such as digital technologies). Thus arose the new literacies studies, which shares with the NLS a social and cultural rather than a psychological approach.

There is yet another wrinkle to this story. In the mid-1990s a group of scholars from the United States, Australia, England, and South Africa met several times, calling themselves “the New London Group” (because their first meeting was in New London, New Hampshire, in the United States). The New London Group (1996) introduced the term “multiliteracies” and stressed the multiplicity of “literacies” in terms of (a) multiple practices using print literacy; (b) practices around multimodal texts that incorporate both images and language; and (c) practices around new digital literacies (just really starting at the time). The New London Group argued, in regard to literacy in all these senses, that people use “signs” (including “grammar”) to produce and “design” their own meanings within communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). They do not just “follow rules.” They actively invent the resources necessary for the meanings they wish to communicate. This idea anticipated, by some years, the current focus in areas like the new media

studies (or new media literacy studies) on production and “participant culture” (Jenkins, 2006). Furthermore, the New London Group applied this production and participation focus to oral language and print literacy, and not just to digital media.

The NLS and the new literacies studies have always had close ties to discourse analysis. They both stress the fact that “technologies” like print or digital media do not have fixed and universal meanings or universal effects on people. Rather, the meaning and effects a “text” (oral, print, or digital) has are always produced in, and vary with, specific contexts of use within practices connected to specific social and cultural groups. Discourse analysis—sometimes extended to the analysis of multimodal texts and images as well—is the tool most used to analyze the production of meanings in context (Gee, 2005). In fact, the NLS can be viewed—though no one put the matter this way—as a discourse analytic (meaning in context) approach to literacy rather than as the traditional “structures in the head” approach. In the examples of NLS work I detail below, we will see discourse data or aspects of the nature of “language in use” that are often used as evidence for NLS claims.

### The NLS: the basic argument

Traditionally, literacy was looked at as primarily a mental phenomenon—the mental “ability” to read and write. In fact, traditionally, all knowledge was viewed as “mental,” and literacy itself was just a form of knowledge, namely knowing how to read and write (Snow *et al.*, 1998).

The traditional view saw both literacy and knowledge in terms of mental representations stored in the head (“mind/brain”). These representations are the way in which information from the world is stored and organized in the mind/brain and in terms of which it is then processed or manipulated. Such a perspective leads to focusing on questions about how information gets into the head, how exactly it is organized in the head, and how it gets back out of the head when people need to use it. And indeed these questions have played a central role in much psychological and educational research.

The NLS attacked (or, at times, simply ignored) this mental view of literacy in favor of a historical and sociocultural approach to literacy. Further, the NLS was part of a larger “social turn” in the 1980s, in which work in a variety of areas began to look at language, literacy, knowledge, and learning in social and cultural terms (Gee, 2000). Sociocultural viewpoints look at knowledge and learning not in terms of representations in the head, but in terms of *relationships* between individuals (with both minds and bodies) and physical, social, and cultural environments in and through which individual think, feel, act, and interact with others (Gee, 2004).

In the 1980s a group of scholars, who would later be seen as foundational to the NLS (Graff, 1979, 1987a, b; Hymes, 1980; Michaels, 1981; Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Scribner and Cole, 1981; Gumperz, 1982a, b; Heath, 1982, 1983; Street, 1984, 1993; Gee, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989; Kress, 1985; Cook-Gumperz, 1986; Wells, 1986; Barton, 1994; Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Cazden, 2001), began seriously to question traditional mental views of literacy as well as the “literacy myth,” the idea that literacy, universally and decontextually, leads to more intelligent, modern, humane, and successful people (Graff, 1979). They did this by asking anew the questions: What is literacy? and What is it good for?

The NLS hit on a seeming paradox: It will not work to define literacy simply as the ability to write and read, though that seems to be the everyday meaning of the word. To see why this is so we need to run through a rather simple argument (Gee, 1989, 2007). The argument has something of the structure of a *reductio ad absurdum*. Our little argument starts with the assumption that reading (or writing) is central to literacy, only to show that this very assumption leads to a view of literacy in which reading or writing (ironically, perhaps) plays a less central role than one might

have thought. We will sketch the argument as it has to do with reading. There is an obvious analogue of the argument that starts with writing, rather than reading.

Here’s the argument. Literacy surely means nothing unless it has something to do with the ability to read. At the level of meaning, “read” is a transitive verb, since it always implies that the reader can read *something*. So literacy must have something to do with being able to read something. And this something will always be a text of a certain type. Different types of texts (e.g. newspapers, comic books, law books, physics texts, math books, novels, poems, advertisements, etc.) call for different types of background knowledge, require different skills to be read meaningfully, and can be and are read in different ways.

To go one step further: no one would say anyone could read a given text if he or she did not know what the text meant. But there are many different levels of meaning one can give to or take from any text, many different ways in which any text can be read. You can read a friend’s letter as a mere report, an indication of her state of mind, a prognosis of her future actions; you can read a novel as a typification of its period and place, as vicarious experience, as “art” of various sorts, as a guide to living, and so on and so forth.

Let me elaborate a bit further on this notion of reading texts in different ways by giving a concrete example. Consider the following sentences from a little story in which a man named “Gregory” has wronged his former girl friend Abigail: “Heartsick and dejected, Abigail turned to Slug with her tale of woe. Slug, feeling compassion for Abigail, sought out Gregory and beat him brutally.” In one study (Gee, 2007), some readers (who happened to be African–Americans) claimed that these sentences “say” that Abigail told Slug to beat up Gregory. On the other hand, other readers (who happened not to be African–Americans) claimed that these sentences “say” no such thing. These readers claim, in fact, that the African–Americans have mis-read the sentences.

The African–Americans responded with remarks like the following: “If you turn to someone with a tale of woe, and, in particular someone named “Slug,” you are most certainly asking him to do something in the way of violence and you are most certainly responsible when he’s done it.”

The point is that these different people read these sentences in different ways and think that others have read them in the “wrong” ways. Even if one thinks that the African–Americans (or the others) have read the sentences “incorrectly,” the very act of claiming that their reading is incorrect admits that there is a way to read the sentences and that we can dispute how (in what way) the sentences ought to be read (and we can ask who determines the “ought” here and why). If we say that the African–Americans have gone too far “beyond” the text (or that other readers who do not follow them have not gone “far” enough), we still are conceding that there is an issue of “how far” to go, what counts as a way (or the way) of reading a text.

Thus, so far, we have concluded that, whatever literacy has to do with reading, reading must be spelled out, at the very least, as multiple abilities to “read” texts of certain types in certain ways or to certain levels. There are obviously many abilities here, each of them a type of literacy, one of a set of literacies.

The next stage of the argument asks: How does one acquire the ability to read a certain type of text in a certain way? Here proponents of a sociocultural approach to literacy argue that the literature on the acquisition and development of literacy is clear (Heath, 1983; Gee, 2004): a way of reading a certain type of text is only acquired when it is acquired in a “fluent” or “native-like” way, by one’s being embedded (apprenticed) as a member of a social practice wherein people not only read texts of this type in this way, but also talk about such texts in certain ways, hold certain attitudes and values about them, and socially interact over them in certain ways.

Thus, one does not learn to read texts of type X in way Y unless one has had the experience of settings where texts of type X are read in way Y. These settings are various sorts of social institutions, like churches, banks, schools, government offices, or social groups with certain sorts

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of interests, like baseball cards, comic books, chess, politics, novels, movies, or what have you. One has to be socialized into a practice to learn to read texts of type X in way Y, a practice other people have already mastered. Since this is so, we can turn literacy on its head, so to speak, and refer crucially to the social institutions or social groups that have these practices, rather than to the literacy practices themselves. When we do this, something odd happens: the practices of such social groups are never just literacy practices. They also involve ways of talking, interacting, thinking, valuing, and believing.

Worse yet, when we look at the practices of such groups, it is next to impossible to separate anything that stands apart as a literacy practice from others practices. Literacy practices are almost always fully integrated with, interwoven into, constituted as parts of, the very texture of wider practices that involve talk, interaction, values, and beliefs. You can no more cut the literacy out of the overall social practice, or cut away the non-literacy parts from the literacy parts of the overall practice, than you can subtract the white squares from a chess board and still have a chess board.

People who take a sociocultural approach to literacy believe that the “literacy myth” (Graff, 1979, 1987a, b)—the idea that literacy leads inevitably to a long list of “good” things—is a “myth” because literacy, in and of itself, abstracted from historical conditions and social practices, has no effects, or at least no predictable effects. Rather what has effects are historically and culturally situated social practices, of which reading and writing are only bits, bits that are differently composed and situated in different social practices. For example, school-based writing and reading leads to different effects than reading and writing embedded in various religious practices (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Kapitzke, 1995). And, further, there are multiple school-based practices and multiple religious practices, each with multiple effects. Literacy has no effects (though, of course, it may well have certain affordances or tendencies)—indeed, no meaning—apart from particular cultural contexts in which it is used, and it has different effects in different contexts (Graff, 1979; Scollon and Scollon, 1981; Scribner and Cole, 1981, 1987a, b; Gee, 2004).

### Examples of founding work in the NLS: Scollon and Scollon

Three founding works that helped initiate the contemporary project of looking at literacy in the context of the social practices and world views of particular social groups were Ronald and Suzanne Scollon’s *Narrative, Literacy and Face in Interethnic Communication* (1981); Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words* (1983); and Brian Street’s *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984). What I want to make clear in my discussion below of these three founding works—all now “old”—is the ways in which, from the outset, work in the NLS melded the study of culture, discourse, language, literacy, and often history and politics.

#### *Scollon and Scollon*

The Scollons believe that discourse patterns—ways of using language to communicate, whether in speech or in writing—in different cultures reflect particular reality sets or world views adopted by these cultures. Discourse patterns are among the strongest expressions of personal and cultural identity. The Scollons argue that changes in a person’s discourse patterns—for example, in acquiring a new form of literacy—may involve change in identity. They provide a detailed study of the discourse practices and world view of Athabaskans in Alaska and northern Canada and they contrast these with the discourse patterns and world view in much of Anglo-Canadian and Anglo-American society (see also Wieder and Pratt, 1990).

Literacy as it is practiced in European-based education (“essay-text literacy” in the Scollons’ phrase) is connected to a reality set or world view that the Scollons term “modern consciousness.”

This reality set is consonant with particular discourse patterns, ones quite different from the discourse patterns used by the Athabaskans. As a result, the acquisition of this sort of literacy is not simply a matter of learning a new technology, it involves complicity with values, social practices, and ways of knowing that conflict with those of the Athabaskans.

Athabaskans differ at various points from mainstream Canadian and American English speakers in how they engage in discourse. A few examples: (1) Athabaskans have a high degree of respect for the individuality of others and a careful guarding of their own individuality. Thus they prefer to avoid conversation, except when the point of view of all participants is well known. On the other hand, English speakers feel that the main way to get to know the point of view of people is through conversation with them. (2) For Athabaskans, people in subordinate positions do not display their capacities or show off, rather they observe the person in the superordinate position. For instance, adults in the capacity of parents or teachers are supposed to display abilities and qualities for the child to learn. However, in mainstream American society, children are supposed to show off their abilities for teachers and other adults. (3) The English idea of “putting your best foot forward” conflicts directly with an Athabaskan taboo. It is normal for an English speaker, in situations of unequal status relations, to display oneself in the best light possible. One will speak highly of the future as well. It is normal to present a career or life trajectory of success and planning. This English system is very different from the Athabaskan system, in which it is considered inappropriate and bad luck to anticipate good luck, to display oneself in a good light, to predict the future, or to speak badly of another’s luck.

The Scollons list many other differences, including differences in systems of pausing that ensure that English speakers select most of the topics and do most of the talking in interethnic encounters. The net result of these communication problems is that each group ethnically stereotypes the other. English speakers come to believe that Athabaskans are unsure, aimless, incompetent, and withdrawn. Athabaskans come to believe that English speakers are boastful, sure that they can predict the future, careless with luck, and far too talkative.

The Scollons, as I mentioned above, characterize the different discourse practices of Athabaskans and English speakers in terms of two different world views or “forms of consciousness”: bush consciousness (connected with survival values in the bush) and modern consciousness. These forms of consciousness are “reality sets” in the sense that they are cognitive orientations toward the everyday world, including learning in that world.

Anglo-Canadian and American mainstream culture has adopted a model of literacy based on the values of the essayist prose style, a model that is highly compatible with modern consciousness. In essayist prose, the important relationships to be signaled are those between sentence and sentence, not those between speakers, nor those between sentence and speaker. For a reader, this requires a constant monitoring of grammatical and lexical information. With the heightened emphasis on truth value rather than social or rhetorical conditions comes the necessity to be explicit about logical implications.

A further significant aspect of the essayist prose style is the fictionalization of both the audience and the author. The “reader” of an essayist text is not an ordinary human being, but an idealization, a rational mind formed by the rational body of knowledge of which the essay is a part. By the same token the author is a fiction, since the process of writing and editing essayist texts leads to an effacement of individual and idiosyncratic identity. The Scollons show the relation of these essayist values to modern consciousness by demonstrating that they are variants of the defining properties of the modern consciousness as given by Berger *et al.* (1973).

For the Athabaskan, writing in this essayist mode can constitute a crisis in ethnic identity. To produce an essay would require the Athabaskan to produce a major display, which would be appropriate only if the Athabaskan was in a position of dominance in relation to the audience. But



the audience, and the author, are fictionalized in essayist prose, and the text becomes decontextualized. This means that a contextualized, social relationship of dominance is obscured. Where the relationship of the communicants is unknown, the Athabaskan prefers silence.

The paradox of prose for the Athabaskan, then, is that, if it is communication between a known author and an audience, it is contextualized and compatible with Athabaskan values, but not good essayist prose. To the extent that communication becomes decontextualized, and thus good essayist prose, it becomes uncharacteristic of Athabaskans to seek to communicate. The Athabaskan set of discourse patterns is to a large extent exclusive of the discourse patterns of essayist prose.

### Examples of founding work: Shirley Brice Heath

Shirley Brice Heath's classic *Ways with Words* (1983) is an ethnographic study of the ways in which literacy is embedded in the cultural context of three communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the US: Roadville, a white working-class community that has been part of mill life for four generations; Trackton, a working-class African-American community whose older generation was brought up on the land, but which now is also connected to mill life and other light industry; and mainstream middle-class urban-oriented African-Americans and whites (see also Heath, 1994).

Heath analyzes the ways these different social groups "take" knowledge from the environment, with particular concern for how "types of literacy events" are involved in this taking. A literacy event is any event involving print, such as group negotiation of meaning in written texts (e.g. an ad), individuals "looking things up" in reference books, writing family records in the Bible, and dozens of other types of occasions when books or other written materials are integral to interpretation in an interaction.

Heath interprets these literacy events in relation to the larger sociocultural patterns that they may exemplify or reflect, such as patterns of care giving roles, uses of space and time, age and sex segregation, and so forth. Since language learning and socialization are two sides of the same coin (Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986), Heath concentrates on how children in each community acquire language and literacy in the process of becoming socialized into the norms and values of their communities.

As school-oriented, middle-class parents and their children interact in the pre-school years, adults give their children, through modeling and specific instruction, ways of using language and of taking knowledge from books that seem natural in school and in numerous other institutional settings such as banks, post offices, businesses, or government offices. To exemplify this point, Heath analyzes the bedtime story as an example of a major literacy event in mainstream homes (Heath, 1982; all page references below are to this article).

The bedtime story sets patterns of behavior that recur repeatedly through the life of mainstream children and adults, at school and in other institutions. In the bedtime story routine, the parent sets up a "scaffolding" dialogue (Cazden, 1979) with the child by asking questions like "What is X?" and then supplying verbal feedback and a label after the child has vocalized or given a nonverbal response. Before the age of two, the child is thus socialized into the "initiation-reply-evaluation" sequences so typical of classroom lessons (Mehan, 1979).

In addition, reading with comprehension involves an internal replaying of the same types of questions adults ask children of bedtime stories. Further, "What is X?" questions and explanations are replayed in the school setting in learning to pick out topic-sentences, write outlines, and answer standardized tests. Through the bedtime story routine and similar practices, in which children learn not only how to take meaning from books, but also how to talk about it, children

repeatedly practice routines that parallel those of classroom interaction: “Thus, there is a deep continuity between patterns of socialization and language learning in the home culture and what goes on at school” (p. 56).

Children in both Roadville and Trackton are unsuccessful in school despite the fact that both communities place a high value on success in school. Roadville adults do read books to their children, but they do not extend the habits of literacy events beyond book reading. For instance they do not, upon seeing an event in the real world, remind children of similar events in a book, or comment on such similarities and differences between book and real events.

The strong religious fundamentalist bent of Roadville tends to make parents view any fictionalized account of a real event as a lie; reality is better than fiction, and they do not encourage the shifting of the context of items and events characteristic of fictionalization and abstraction. They tend to choose books that emphasize nursery rhymes, alphabet learning, and simplified Bible stories. Even the oral stories that Roadville adults tell, and that children model, are grounded in the actual. The sources of these stories are personal experience. They are tales of transgression, which make the point of reiterating the expected norms of behavior.

Thus Roadville children are not practiced in decontextualizing their knowledge or fictionalizing events known to them, shifting them about into other frames. In school they are rarely able to take knowledge learned in one context and shift it to another; they do not compare two items or events and point out similarities and differences.

Trackton presents a quite different language and social environment. Babies in Trackton, who are almost always held during their waking hours, are constantly in the midst of a rich stream of verbal and nonverbal communication that goes on around them. Aside from Sunday School materials, there are no reading materials in the home just for children; adults do not sit and read to children. Children do, however, constantly interact verbally with peers and adults.

Adults do not ask children “What is X?” questions, but rather analogical questions, which call for non-specific comparisons of one item, event, or person with another (e.g. “What’s that like?”). Though children can answer such questions, they can rarely name the specific feature or features that make two items or events alike.

Parents do not believe they have a tutoring role, and they do not simplify their language for children, as mainstream parents do, nor do they label items or features of objects in either books or the environment at large. They believe children learn when they are provided with experiences from which they can draw global rather than analytically specific knowledge. Heath claims that children in Trackton seem to develop connections between situations or items by gestalt patterns, analogs, or general configuration links, not by specification of labels and discrete features in the situation. They do not decontextualize, rather they heavily contextualize nonverbal and verbal language.

Trackton children learn to tell stories by rendering a context and calling on the audience’s participation to join in the imaginative creation of the story. In an environment rich in imaginative talk and verbal play, they must be aggressive in inserting their stories into an ongoing stream of discourse. Imagination and verbal dexterity are encouraged.

Indeed, group negotiation and participation constitute a prevalent feature of the social group as a whole. Adults read not alone but in a group. For example, someone may read from a brochure on a new car while listeners relate the text’s meaning to their experiences, asking questions and expressing opinions. The group as a whole synthesizes the written text and the associated oral discourse to construct a meaning for the brochure.

At school, most Trackton children not only fail to learn the content of lessons, they also do not adopt the social interactional rules for school literacy events. Print in isolation bears little authority in their world, and the kinds of questions asked of reading books are unfamiliar (for example,

what-explanations). The children's abilities to link metaphorically two events or situations and to recreate scenes are not tapped into at school. In fact these abilities often cause difficulties, because they enable children to see parallels teachers did not intend to—and indeed may not—recognize until the children point them out. By the time in their education, after the elementary years for the most part, when their imaginative skills and verbal dexterity could really pay off, they have failed to gain the necessary written composition skills they would need in order to translate their analogical skills into a channel teachers could accept.

Heath's characterization of Trackton, Roadville, and Mainstreamers leads us to see, not a binary (oral/literate) contrast, but a set of features that cross-classifies the three groups in various ways. The groups share various features with each other, and differ from each other in yet other regards. The Mainstream group and Trackton both value imagination and fictionalization, while the Roadville does not; the Roadville and the Trackton group both share a disregard for decontextualization that is not shared by Mainstreamers. Both Mainstreamers and Roadville, but not Trackton, believe parents to have a tutoring role in language and literacy acquisition (they read to their children and ask questions that require labels), but Roadville shares with Trackton, not with the Mainstream, an experiential, non-analytic view of learning (children learn by doing and watching, not by having the process broken down into its smallest parts). As we added more groups to the comparison, e.g. the Athabaskans (which share with the Trackton group a regard for gestalt learning and storage of knowledge, but differ from it in the degree of self-display they allow), we would get more complex cross-classifications.

Heath suggests that, in order for a non-mainstream social group to acquire mainstream, school-based literacy practices, with all the oral and written language skills this implies, individuals, whether children or adults, must "recapitulate," at an appropriate level for their age, of course, the sorts of literacy experiences the mainstream child has had at home. Unfortunately, schools as currently constituted tend to be good places to practice mainstream literacy once you have its foundations, but they are often not good places to acquire those foundations (for example, to engage in the sorts of emergent literacy practices common in many middle-class homes).

Heath also suggests that this foundation, when it has not been set at home, can be acquired by apprenticing the individual to a school-based literate person, for example the teacher, in a new and expanded role. Heath has had students, at a variety of ages, engage in ethnographic research with teachers, studying for instance the uses of language or languages, or of writing and reading, in their own communities. This serves as one way for students to learn and practice, in a meaningful context, the various sub-skills of essay-text literacy (e.g. asking questions, note-taking, discussion of various points of view, as well as writing discursive prose and revising it) with feedback, often from non-present readers.

This approach fits perfectly with Scribner and Cole's (1981) practice account of literacy. And, in line with Street's ideological approach to literacy (see below), it claims that individuals who have not been socialized into the discourse practices that constitute mainstream school-based literacy must eventually be socialized into them if they are ever to acquire them. The skills component of this form of literacy must be practiced, and one cannot practice a skill one has not been exposed to, or engage in a social practice one has not been socialized into—which is what most non-mainstream children are expected to do in school. But at the same time we must remember the Scollons warning that, for many social groups, this practice may well mean a change of identity and the adoption of a reality set at odds with their own at various points. There is a deep paradox here, and there is no facile way of removing it, short of changing our hierarchical social structure and the school systems that by and large perpetuate it.

## Examples of founding work: Brian Street

The work of Scribner and Cole—another founding work in the NLS—calls into question what Brian Street, in his book *Literacy in Theory and Practice* (1984), calls “the autonomous model” of literacy: the claim that literacy (or schooling, for that matter) has cognitive effects apart from the context in which it exists and the uses to which it is put in a given culture. This is also sometimes called “the literacy myth.” Claims for literacy, in particular for essay-text literacy values, whether in speech or writing, are thus “ideological.” They are part of an armory of concepts, conventions, and practices that privilege one social formation as if it were natural, universal, or at least the end point of a normal developmental progression (achieved only by some cultures, thanks either to their intelligence or to their technology).

Street proposes, in opposition to the “autonomous model” of literacy, an “ideological model.” The ideological model attempts to understand literacy in terms of concrete social practices and to theorize it in terms of the ideologies in which different literacies are embedded. Literacy—of whatever type—only has consequences as it acts together with a large number of other social factors, including political and economic conditions, social structure, and local ideologies.

Any technology, including writing, is a cultural form, a social product whose shape and influence depend upon prior political and ideological factors. Despite Eric Havelock’s (1976) brilliant characterization of the transition from orality to literacy in ancient Greece, for example, it now appears that the Greek situation has rarely if ever been replicated. The particular social, political, economic, and ideological circumstances in which literacy (of a particular sort) was embedded in Greece explain what happened there. Abstracting literacy from its social setting in order to make claims for literacy as an autonomous force in shaping the mind or a culture simply leads to a dead end. This is so because literacy’s effects always flow from its social and cultural contexts and vary across those contexts.

There is, however, a last refuge for someone who wants to see literacy as an autonomous force. One could claim that essay-text literacy and the uses of language connected with it lead, if not to general cognitive consequences, to social mobility and success in the society. While this argument may be true, there is precious little evidence that literacy in history or across cultures has had this effect either.

Street discusses, in this regard, Harvey Graff’s (1979) study of the role of literacy in nineteenth-century Canada. While some individuals did gain through the acquisition of literacy, Graff demonstrates that this was not a statistically significant effect and that deprived classes and ethnic groups as a whole were, if anything, further oppressed through literacy. Greater literacy did not correlate with increased equality and democracy, nor with better conditions for the working class, but in fact with continuing social stratification.

Graff argues that the teaching of literacy in fact involved a contradiction: illiterates were considered dangerous to the social order, thus they must be made literate; yet the potentialities of reading and writing for an underclass could well be radical and inflammatory. So the framework for the teaching of literacy had to be severely controlled, and this involved specific forms of control of the pedagogic process and specific ideological associations of the literacy being purveyed.

While the workers were led to believe that acquiring literacy was in their benefit, Graff produces statistics to show that, in reality, this literacy was not advantageous to the poorer groups in terms of either income or power. The extent to which literacy was an advantage or not in relation to job opportunities depended on ethnicity. It was not because you were “illiterate” that you finished up in the worst jobs, but because of your background (e.g. being Black or an Irish Catholic rendered literacy much less efficacious than it was for English Protestants).

The story Graff tells can be repeated for many other societies, including Britain and the United States (Donald, 1983; Levine, 1986). In all these societies literacy served as a socializing tool for the poor; but it was seen as a possible threat if misused by the poor (toward an analysis of their oppression and to make demands for power), and it served as a technology for the continued selection of members of one class for the best positions in the society. Yoshio Sugimoto (2003) talks about a parallel situation in Japan, where social class strongly dictates “success” in society, despite the nation’s high literacy rates and the mainstream acceptance of Japan as an egalitarian society with equal opportunities.

## Conclusion

I have concentrated in this paper on three founding documents in the NLS, in order to give readers a feel for the basic ideas and approaches that formed the NLS. There are, of course, other equally important pieces of early work that I could have surveyed. Also, the work I have surveyed is now dated, though it still incorporates the core arguments for and approaches to literacy as social and cultural that are the foundations of the NLS. For another discussion of the foundations of the NLS and for some more current applications, see Hull and Schultz (2001). Current work has continued along the lines of the foundational work I have surveyed (e.g. Larson and Marsh, 2005; Pahl and Rowsell, 2005, 2006; Gee, 2007), though today NLS work is commonly combined with the new literacies studies, to incorporate new forms of literacy, forms that often use not just (or not even) the technology of print, but digital media (e.g. Gee, 2004; Lankshear and Knobel, 2007). Finally, the NLS shows us that, when we move from a psychological approach to a sociocultural approach to something like literacy (or knowledge, the emotions, or problem solving, for example), then discourse analysis and ethnography become the favored methods of research.

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