

# The Politics of Writing Instruction: Postsecondary

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*To all those students—past,  
present, and future—  
whose encounters and struggles  
with reading and writing  
keep our job forever political.*

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## Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis

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Since *Newsweek's* "Why Johnny Can't Write" issue appeared on December 8, 1975, the idea of a national literacy crisis has become a fixture in the popular consciousness. The resonance of the two terms—"literacy" and "crisis"—has taken on a certain formulaic, self-explanatory quality. Just to utter the phrase is to perform the act, putting literacy in crisis by releasing diffuse but widely shared anxieties about deteriorating educational standards, drops in test scores, the permissiveness of the 1960s, black English, the effects of television and video games, John Dewey and progressive education, and the failure to compete economically with the Japanese. The rhetorical power of the phrase "literacy crisis" resides in its ability to condense a broad range of cultural, social, political, and economic tensions into one central image.

Writing teachers and writing-program administrators have not been immune to the rhetorical power of this widely heralded literacy crisis. If anything, the idea of a literacy crisis has been taken for granted as a handy rationale to offer department chairs, deans, faculty committees, and external grant-funding agencies. The very words "literacy crisis" have become a ritual invocation that justifies our activities and shapes our self-images. We like to think that we writing teachers, theorists, researchers, and program administrators (unlike our colleagues in literature) are going about society's business, doing what parents, the public, and the employers of our graduates want done—to teach our students how to read and write or, as employer surveys often put it, how to "communicate effectively."

There is little question that writing programs and composition studies have been direct beneficiaries of the current literacy crisis. Many colleges and universities that dropped freshman composition requirements in the 1960s have reinstated them. There has been a proliferation of new courses in technical, business, scientific, and legal writing, new writing-across-the-curriculum programs, new writing requirements in the junior year—in short, a new awareness of and institutional commitment to the importance

of writing in undergraduate education. In the flurry of activity it has taken to launch new courses and programs, however, we have not stopped often enough to ask what we are subscribing to when we say the magic words "literacy crisis," what we are taking for granted. The purpose of this chapter is to investigate the cultural and political meanings of a discourse that puts literacy in crisis.

The *Newsweek* article "Why Johnny Can't Write" offers a useful starting place to look at the rhetorical strategies that have articulated the literacy crisis. The article begins by speaking directly to parents:

If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate, they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. (58)

Forget for a moment the methodological difficulties of determining exactly what a "minimal college level" of literacy might be. Forget, too, how recent work on the discipline-specific genres of academic discourse calls into question the possibility of formulating any general model of "ordinary, expository English." Notice instead the alarmist tone and the appeal to parental anxieties. What *Newsweek* writer Merrill Sheils taps into are the anxieties arising from a particular historical conjuncture during the Carter years of the mid-1970s—a time of energy crisis, declining productivity and "stagflation," the Iran hostage crisis, diminished expectations, and increased competition for jobs and college admission.

Sheils constructs a scenario of worried parents concerned not about the public good and how to provide a decent education for all children but about their private interests and how to secure a competitive edge for their children. Confronting the beleaguered parental figure in Sheils's scenario are a range of stock characters: the "permissive" or radical teacher, the "progressive" school system experimenting with the child, affirmative-action and equal-opportunity programs that "favor" minorities and lower standards, college admission committees scrutinizing SAT scores and class rank, prospective employers who repeatedly find that recent graduates can't read and write well or "communicate effectively." Lurking just below the surface of Sheils's scenario, however, more powerful because it is not articulated explicitly, is the ongoing crisis of the middle class, the threat of downward mobility to baby boomers and their children as the bubble of postwar prosperity and American global hegemony burst in the 1970s.

The discourse of the literacy crisis of the mid-1970s offered middle-class parents an explanation of what was troubling them, a reason for the perceived uncertainty about their children's futures. For the middle class, the crisis of literacy standards appeared to deprive the schools of a fundamental

measure to rank students in a meritocratic order, to certify the success of *their* children, and to legitimate the unequal outcomes of the others—the minorities, the poor, and the working class. As Sheils stages it, the literacy crisis of the mid-1970s registers a crisis of confidence in which public education no longer seems to be linked directly to individual success and economic well-being. But instead of fostering a critical examination of the connection among schooled literacy, upward mobility, and national prosperity—the constellation of popular beliefs the historian Harvey Graff has labeled the "literacy myth"—the prevailing discourse of crisis reinvests mythic powers in literacy, calling upon literacy standards to shore up a faltering meritocracy.

The final paragraph of "Why Johnny Can't Write" explains how this is to be done:

The point is that there have to be some fixed rules, however tedious, if the codes of human communication are to remain decipherable. If the written language is placed at the mercy of every new colloquialism and if every fresh dialect demands and gets equal sway, then we will soon find ourselves back in Babel. In America . . . there are too many people intent on being masters of their language and too few willing to be its servants. (65)

Sheils couches her "point" here in terms of a call for standard English as the proper arbiter of language practice and literacy instruction, an argument for an authoritative version of written English and *against* the incursion of colloquialism and dialect. Sheils's goal is a reaffirmation of linguistic norms in order to regularize and regulate communication, to halt the slide into a pluralistic, polyphonic English. This argument, of course, rehashes an old debate about the nature of language that goes back at least to the eighteenth century, with advocates of a final, fixed version on one side and advocates of an organic, developing version on the other—correctness versus usage. The danger Sheils refers to, however, is not and never has been that of reverting "back to Babel." The threat is not that of linguistic chaos but of blurring the lines between "us" and "them," between what Sheils so revealingly calls "masters" and "servants."

At stake in Sheils's discourse of crisis is not whether students read and write better or worse than they did twenty or fifty years ago, but whether literacy can still draw lines of social distinction, mark status, and rank students in a meritocratic order. The literacy crisis *Newsweek* announced in the mid-1970s is only a continuation of an ongoing discourse that has repeatedly put literacy in crisis since the mid-nineteenth century. This discourse is not concerned primarily with student performances, declining standards, or increased social demand for reading and writing. Rather, the discourse of literacy crises engages deep-seated cultural anxieties and attempts to resolve them magically, by regulating the production and use

of literacy and by drawing lines between standard English and popular vernaculars, "masters" and "servants." My argument is that middle-class anxieties about loss of status and downward mobility have repeatedly been displaced and refigured in the realm of language practices and literacy education. For the middle class, literacy appears to go into crisis precisely because of the faith they have invested in schooled literacy as the surest means of upward mobility and individual success, a form of cultural capital that separates their children from those of the working class and the poor.

### Historiography of Literacy Crises

The key text that informs my argument is a passage from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. What Gramsci says in the following lines advances our understanding of literacy crises more than all of the alarmist rhetoric that has accumulated since "Why Johnny Can't Write" appeared:

Each time that in one way or another the question of language comes to the fore, that signifies that a series of other problems is about to emerge, the formation and enlarging of the ruling class, the necessity to establish more "intimate" and sure relations between ruling groups and the national popular masses, that is the reorganization of cultural hegemony. (quoted in Giroux 1)

Literacy crises, as I will show, have served as strategic sites for what Gramsci calls the "reorganization of cultural hegemony." Cultural hegemony is a term Gramsci uses to describe two interrelated processes—the consolidation of political authority by the state through consent rather than coercion, and the establishment of the leadership of one particular class or political group in relation to other classes and political groups. As Gramsci suggests, literacy crises play out in symbolic form the relations between "ruling groups" and the "popular masses," as well as the aspirations of the middle class to intellectual, moral, and political leadership. Cultural hegemony is rarely imposed from above. It has to be negotiated locally in the practices and procedures of everyday life, naturalized as a matter of what we take to be common sense. The negotiation of cultural hegemony, that is, involves a double making: the hegemonic representations articulated by the dominant culture must also, as Stuart Hall puts it, "foster forms of consciousness which accept a position of subordination" (59).

From this perspective, the discourse that creates a crisis in literacy cannot be understood apart from the rise of mass public schooling and the establishment of a meritocratic educational order. Literacy crises have been instrumental in both the appropriation of literacy by the institutions of public schooling and the naturalization of schooled literacy as a moral and cognitive measure of the individual. Inspired by middle-class aspirations, the discourse of literacy crises portrays the schooled literacy of public

education simultaneously as an arena of equal opportunity for all who wish to enter and as an explanation of the success or failure of individuals in class society.

To see literacy crises as negotiations of cultural hegemony means, for one thing, that we cannot dismiss them, as leftists sometimes do, simply as hoaxes, manufactured events, plots by the ruling class and its house intellectuals. While the reasons given to establish the reality of literacy crises—the connection, say, between illiteracy and crime in the nineteenth century or the decline of test scores in the twentieth—do not hold up well to empirical scrutiny, these reasons nonetheless constitute necessary and enabling fictions that inscribe motives in educational policy and practice. To say that literacy crises are ideological events does not mean that they simply purvey forms of false consciousness that disguise the "real" interests of the ruling class in the name of the general public interest. Rather, literacy crises are attempts to resolve in imaginary ways actual tensions, anxieties, and contradictions. To think of literacy crises as ideological events is to think rhetorically—to see literacy crises conjuncturally, as strategic pretexts for educational and cultural change that renegotiate the terms of cultural hegemony, the relations between classes and groups, and the meaning and use of literacy.

This perspective on literacy crises, moreover, differs markedly from the prevailing accounts offered to explain what causes literacy to go into crisis. The historiography of literacy crises in American history remains in a rudimentary and impressionistic phase. Those who write about literacy crises do not agree on what causes them, how many there have been, or even how we should define literacy. Nonetheless, for our purposes here, we can distinguish two representations of literacy crises, two ways of telling the story.

The first explanation asserts that literacy crises occur when the ability to read and write actually and demonstrably declines. The second holds that literacy crises result not from deteriorating performances but from heightened expectations and increased social and economic demand for reading and writing. The first explanation employs a narrative that tells of the decline of literacy; the second, a narrative that tells of its progress. Each has shaped the discourse of literacy crises in important ways, and each, as we will see, has done more to restrict our understanding than to illuminate it.

#### *The Narrative of Literacy's Decline*

In "Why Johnny Can't Write," *Newsweek* reporter Sheils tells the story of literacy in decline, a narrative strategy shared by a wide range of commentators, from Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., to Edwin Newman and John Simon. We can find earlier instances of this policing of language during the 1950s in books such as *Why Johnny Can't Read* and *Educational*

*Wastelands*, but the decline narrative goes back much further into the American past. There are signs of it, for example, as early as the 1830s and 1840s, in what Dennis Baron calls "linguistic insecurity." Linguistic insecurity was a persistent theme in the nineteenth century that resulted, on the one hand, from nationalist sentiment to overcome cultural dependence on England by affirming the value of American English and, on the other, from the representation of linguistic propriety as a mark of class, status, and social position, necessary for self-improvement and upward mobility. Throughout the nineteenth century, the middle class worried about the state of American English, about the coarsening effects of the frontier, regional dialects, and urban immigrant masses, about the correctness and propriety of their own speech habits and forms of written expression. By the 1890s, as E. L. Godkin's "The Illiteracy of American Boys" indicates, the decline theory had become a popular preoccupation. "I meet every day with men whom we call educated," Godkin writes, "who do not seem to care how they speak or how they write." Not only is the language of the educated in decline, but, as Godkin asserts, a "dialect is being formed today under our very noses in New York, which bears only a faint resemblance to English" (2).

Godkin's article on the "growing illiteracy" of those entering college takes as its starting point what is offered as empirical evidence of deteriorating educational standards—the entrance examinations read by the Harvard Committee on Composition and Rhetoric, of which Godkin was a member. The Harvard Report issued by the committee in 1893 caused a scandal about the preparation of secondary students in writing and initiated a now familiar tradition of articulating a literacy crisis by presenting test results to shock the public and the educational community. Since the 1890s, we can see literacy crises produced, as it were, by the extension of standardized testing: during World War I with the first widescale intelligence testing of Army recruits, again during World War II with further mass testing, and most recently in the notorious decline of SAT scores from 1963 to 1980.

Test results, of course, possess a kind of facticity that appears to put them above question and beyond interpretation. They appear, that is, to offer self-evident accounts of literacy crises—of deteriorating educational standards and declining student performances. It is a mistake, however, to assume, as advocates of the decline theory do, that test scores speak for themselves. We might, for example, read the Harvard Report of 1893 not as the result of the deplorable preparation of entering freshmen but, as Susan Miller does in this volume, as the response of an antidemocratic and elitist Old Guard to the admission of "new" students drawn from what Godkin calls the "unliterary" and "illiterate" families of the new middle class. By Miller's account, the Harvard Report registers the renegotiation of higher education's traditional mission of preparing a liberally educated elite from the best families for careers in the law, medicine, the ministry,

and public service into that of training white-collar workers, professionals, and technical experts to staff the ranks of an emerging corporate order.

Along the same lines, critics such as Ira Shor, Richard Ohmann, and Andrew Sledd have offered readings of the declining test scores of the 1960s and 1970s that contest their self-evident status as proof that literacy is in decline. Shor argues that the decline of SAT scores, which were especially (and disturbingly) pronounced among the highest-achieving students, resulted from a "performance strike," an expression of disenchantment with schooling, a sign of the wider alienation of American youth from mainstream values and of their recognition that an increasingly "over-educated" society could not provide jobs commensurate with individuals' levels of academic attainment. Ohmann points out that despite the drop in SAT scores (which, after all, do not contain a writing sample), other test scores from the 1970s such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress reveal limited, if uneven, gains in writing skills. Sledd asserts that the decline of SAT scores can be accounted for by reference not to a literacy crisis but to a "demographic bulge," in which more students from large families, who typically perform at levels below those of students from small families, were taking the SATs in the 1970s. Once the family size of the test takers dropped in the early 1980s, the test scores corrected themselves and started to rise. Finally, in the one case I know of where there are large-scale comparative data, Robert J. Connors and Andrea Lunsford have replicated the research of John C. Hodges, author of the *Harbrace College Handbook*, who in 1939 analyzed patterns of error marked on 20,000 student themes. Connors and Lunsford found that students make about the same number of errors, if somewhat different ones, as they did fifty years ago.

My point here is not to disprove the literacy crisis of the mid-1970s but to separate its discourse from the empirical evidence it has relied upon. As Shor, Ohmann, and Sledd argue, we can read the test results to tell the story not of a "decline in literacy" but of "an *increase* in equality and social justice" (Ohmann 233)—a sign of the expansion of educational opportunity in the late 1960s and early 1970s for women, minorities, and working-class students who had formerly been excluded from higher education. And from this perspective, alarmism about declining test scores and educational standards can be seen not just as a pretext to return to the basics and restore order, discipline, and morality to the schools. It also registers anxiety that the meritocracy itself has broken down. The discourse of literacy in crisis is not simply a nostalgic longing for a golden age of American education, but an antidemocratic attack on the educational reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, an offensive to stop affirmative-action, remedial, and equal-opportunity programs in higher education and to firm up the meritocracy in order to consolidate the privileges of middle-class and upper middle-class students.

*The Narrative of Literacy's Progress*

It is easy enough to read the narrative of literacy's decline as a reaction not against threatened standards but rather against different, more democratic standards. There is, however, another explanation of literacy crises that appears to be more plausible. In "The Nature of Literacy: An Historical Explanation," Daniel P. Resnick and Lauren B. Resnick argue that it is not low achievement but increased cultural expectations that promote concern about literacy standards. Robin Varnum has used this argument to claim that the history of literacy crises tells the story not of declining standards but of progress. With each successive crisis, she says, "a new and higher standard of literacy had come generally to be accepted" (153). Economic and technological development led to a current standard of literacy that is "vastly more sophisticated than those concepts which were current in 1880 or 1920" (160). Moreover, for Varnum, literacy crises demonstrate not the failure but the success of American education: "in the reform movements which have resulted from each crisis, American educators have continuously been successful in meeting the challenge of raised expectations" (148).

Now there is, to be sure, some truth in the Resnick-Varnum narrative of progress. As the Resnicks point out, literacy no longer means just the ability to sign one's name, as it did in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, or the ability to decode written passages without considering comprehension, as it did in many nineteenth-century common schools. Varnum shows that the concept of literacy was indeed enlarged during World War I, when the general intelligence tests administered to Army recruits required the ability to comprehend what was read. During World War II, the fear of propaganda and what communications advocate Lennox Grey called "the advanced illiteracy that makes dupes of facile but uncritical readers" raised the standard of literacy to include the ability to analyze assumptions and draw inferences from written texts.

By this account, literacy crises take place when a cultural lag occurs, when literacy practices and literacy education have not quite caught up to increased expectations and heightened demand. Literacy crises result, that is, from the progressive imperatives of public policy, economic development, technological and scientific innovation. This explanation of literacy crises, moreover, underwrites the way a sector of business and government—"new-age" postindustrial managers, technocratic futurists, and manpower allocators—has described the need for increased literacy standards and a more highly trained and trainable workforce as the economy shifts from an industrial assembly line to a new high-tech service and information economy. In this view, a heightened demand for literacy is linked to job performance, productivity, and the need to improve the competitive position of the United States in the world market. Postindustrial politicians are more likely to explain why the United States has lost its competitive edge by citing the presumed, if highly questionable, correlation between productivity and universal literacy rates in Japan than by citing standardized test scores.

The point to make here is that the increased demand for literacy and the raised expectations about literacy standards are not as innocent or as uniformly progressive as the Resnicks and Varnum suggest. Varnum's account of literacy crises portrays literacy as a neutral technology that changes meaning and gains greater sophistication in response to modernizing trends and progressive socioeconomic pressures. My argument is that literacy and its crises are always interested, always articulated in a relation to power and the negotiation of cultural hegemony. By translating the increased demand for literacy as the inevitable result of economic and technological progress, Varnum leaves out the ways in which "raised expectations" express political interests and social tensions. To cite an obvious example, the literacy tests adopted as a requirement for suffrage by Connecticut in 1855 and Massachusetts in 1857 resulted not from so-called heightened standards of literacy but from a heightened desire to exclude Irish Catholics from political participation. Similarly, the use of literacy tests in the post-Reconstruction South was part of a wider consolidation of white supremacy and a Jim Crow regime.

There is no question that a major shift is going on in the American economy. The commodification and computerization of information can be seen in the widespread use of data processing, marketing research, and computer simulations. Information is entering and transforming the means of production to an unprecedented degree. But it is unclear whether these changes mean that higher levels of literacy are actually required for job performance when nine new jobs are created for cashiers and checkout clerks to each one for computer programmers.

The "raised expectations" about literacy currently held by policymakers do not simply reflect wider changes in the economy. These expectations also articulate new relations to a changing workforce. According to a recent study conducted by the Hudson Institute for the Labor Department, lower birth rates among whites compared with other groups of Americans, combined with immigration from Asia and Latin America, are producing telling demographic changes in the workforce. By the year 2000, the study estimates, 80 percent of the people entering the workforce will be women, blacks, Hispanics, or immigrants. For policymakers, literacy appears to be a key tool to socialize these new workers to the discipline of the workplace and to guarantee productivity. As Kenneth Levine's study of employers' use of literacy tests as screening devices for prospective employees suggests, literacy may not be directly related to the type of occupation or job skills demanded of these new workers. Instead, as Levine argues, literacy serves as a kind of "proxy" to assess cooperativeness, reliability, and trainability.

Marcienne S. Mattleman and Joe Torsella claim that the social costs of illiteracy have reached "frightening dimensions," prompted not only by the "billions of dollars" illiteracy costs the economy in "unemployment, underemployment, and diminished worker productivity" but, more tellingly, by a "social landscape of crime, drug abuse, and hopelessness" in which

illiteracy is embedded. Their argument, however, speaks more to the persistent effects of Reaganomics and the turning of the United States into a "double-peaked" society of rich and poor than to a crisis in literacy. Rather, literacy appears both as a social explanation that individualizes oppression by blaming the victim and as a tool to incorporate all the "other Americas"—the poor, blacks, Hispanics, new Asian immigrants—into a monolingual body politic.

### Transformations of Literacy

What I hope to have suggested so far is that literacy crises are always strategic: They perform certain kinds of ideological work by giving a name to and thereby mastering (rhetorically if not actually) cultural anxieties released by demographic shifts, changes in the means of production, new relations and conflicts between classes and groups of people, and reconfigurations of cultural hegemony. By representing literacy in crisis, the discourse of literacy externalizes these deeper structural changes and shifts in the political balance of power and refigures them in the problem of language and education—of learning how to read and write.

The story of literacy crises I want to tell emphasizes the ideological work performed by the schooling of literacy—the appropriation and regulation of the multiple popular literacies that flourished before the common-school movement and the institution of mass public education in the mid-nineteenth century. Literacy crises can best be understood not in terms of student performance or social demand but in terms of the transformations of literacy enacted by the common-school crusade of 1840 to 1870 and the rise of progressive education from 1890 to 1920. During these two periods of school reform—against a backdrop of massive and rapid social change, industrialization, immigration, urbanization, and class strife—common-school advocates and progressive educators, in different ways, represented schooled literacy as a means of ameliorating class antagonisms, equalizing economic opportunity, and ensuring social cohesion and political integration. By incorporating literacy into the institutions of schooling, the common-school movement established, and progressive education refined, a discursive apparatus to regulate the production of literacy and to measure its outcomes.

The primary effect of the schooling of literacy has been to equate literacy with educational practices, to identify reading and writing as a set of discrete skills and subskills students acquire as they move from grade level to grade level, the necessary foundation of a student's ongoing education. But it is precisely because we have so thoroughly naturalized literacy as a fundamental outcome of schooling that we need to look more closely at how schooling has transformed literacy and defined its cultural meanings.

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, two apparently contradictory attitudes toward literacy vied for influence among ruling

elites in the Anglo-American world. On the one hand, republican spokesmen in America argued that literacy was a key component of nation building and a responsibility of the state. Schooled literacy was seen as a social necessity, not an individual right—a means of overcoming regionalism and securing the loyalty of citizens to the central state. As Samuel Harmon Smith wrote in 1798, "it is the duty of the nation to superintend and even coerce the education of children, and . . . high considerations of expediency not only justify, but dictate the establishment of a system which shall place under a control, independent of, and superior to, parental authority, the education of children" (quoted in Soltow and Stevens 47–48). In this regard, Benjamin Rush, one of the early leading advocates of public education, was even more blunt: "Let our pupil be taught that he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property" (quoted in Spring 83). On the other hand, in England, Tories also say literacy in social and political terms, but ironically their anxieties developed because the popular masses had indeed learned to read and, to a lesser extent, to write. In the shadow of the French Revolution, British commentator Vicesimus Knox observed gloomily in 1793 that the "lowest of the people can read." Political debates once confined to the propertied classes, Knox complained, have now spread to the "cottages, the manufactory, and lowest resorts of plebeian carousel. Great changes in the public mind are produced by this diffusion; and such changes must produce public innovation" (quoted in Laquer 195).

Tories such as Knox linked literacy to Jacobinism, religious dissent, and working-class radicalism. While such explicitly reactionary sentiments were rarely expressed so overtly in the United States, the codes that made it a crime for slaves to learn to read and write reveal the recognition by North American slaveowners and their northern sympathizers of the subversive powers of literacy. It is noteworthy that the last of the prohibitions on literacy was made into law in 1835, just after Nat Turner's rebellion, at a time when white fears of slave revolts had reached a peak of intensity.

An episode from Frederick Douglass's autobiography offers a clarifying case in point of the ideological construction of literacy in the antebellum South. When Douglass's master ordered his wife to stop teaching Douglass to read, the slaveowner made it clear what was at stake:

"If you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." (36)

For Douglass, however, the master's opposition to his learning to read and write came as a "new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things. . . . I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man" (36).

Despite the threat of punishment or of being sold, slaves continued clandestinely to learn to read and write, for religious reasons and as an act of political resistance. The acquisition of literacy enabled slaves to circumvent their masters' control in important ways. Literate slaves wrote passes for themselves and for fellow slaves to visit relatives and friends on nearby plantations or to escape to the North. Slaves such as Douglass and Harriet Jacobs first learned of the abolitionist movement by reading newspapers and pamphlets, and they used the literacy they had acquired to forge a public voice for African-Americans through slave narratives and antislavery writings. Historians' estimates of literacy among slaves range from 5 to 27 percent (Finkelstein 138, n. 50), and these figures testify to the persistent struggle of African-Americans to assert their identity, to create free spaces within an oppressive slaveholding order, and to influence public opinion against slavery.

Among free whites, before the establishment of mass public education, upwards of 80 percent of the men and a somewhat lesser percentage of women could read and write on at least a rudimentary level. This popular literacy was transmitted as frequently through the family or from master to apprentice as through schooling. Unlike the literacy of the common schools, popular literacy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was largely a local phenomenon, embedded in the everyday life, practical affairs, and political activities of family, workplace, and community. For the white male population of merchants, farmers, mechanics, and artisans, literacy was tied inextricably to the democratic aspirations of the new nation. Jacksonian Democrats, the International Workingmen's Association, and organizations of mechanics and artisans viewed literacy as a means of alerting victims of inequality and injustice to the evils of the aristocrats and monopolists. Literacy offered a weapon to defend democratic principles, a means to curb the power of the state and to attack the elitism of existing educational institutions. Broadside, ballads, newspapers, political and religious tracts, books, and almanacs circulated widely in the early nineteenth century—enlarging the public sphere of civil society. As Shirley Brice Heath notes, the “writing of reports of opinion and events and how-to accounts was viewed as the responsibility of all citizens across social classes and roles. . . . In the new republic, literacy was both a Christian and a patriotic duty” (28). Rooted in the everyday life of ordinary people, popular literacy in the early nineteenth century belonged to civil society, not to the state. It was a tool for organizing and maintaining the voluntary associations Tocqueville found so uniquely characteristic of American aspirations, a part of a wider democratic culture.

This popular literacy, moreover, contrasts sharply with the literacy instruction provided through private and public schools during the same period. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, educators were extremely reluctant to teach writing as well as reading, especially to poor and working-class students. This was due in part to the scarcity of

quills, ink, and paper in early American schools, but there were also ideological pressures that restricted literacy education to reading. One was the legacy of the Protestant Reformation and its view of literacy as a matter of religious training and reading the Bible. The English evangelical educational reformer Hannah More wrote that her “plan of instruction” for the poor “is extremely simple and limited. They learn, on weekdays, such coarse works as may fit them for servants. *I allow of no writing for the poor.* My object is not to make them fanatics, but to train up the lower classes in habits of industry and piety” (quoted in Soltow and Stevens 13, my emphasis). It was one thing for the poor to learn to read the Bible and religious tracts. Writing was more threatening to the ruling elite because it provided the populace with a means to voice their own interests and to participate more widely in public and political life. In England, the Anglican-run public schools of the early nineteenth century only gradually added writing to the curriculum, and then only in response to the fact that working-class youth were already learning to write in Sunday schools and the indigenous private schools that grew up in working-class communities. In the United States, the private and public schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries remained under religious influence, and writing instruction was largely confined to copying exercises, penmanship, and memorization drills.

The neglect of writing instruction must be seen, however, not just as a repression of individual and collective expression. It was also part of a reorientation of individuals and groups toward literacy through schooling. What early nineteenth-century forms of literacy instruction in America and England suggest is that evangelical reformers such as Hannah More and advocates for Lancasterian monitorial schools, which provided the dominant model of instructing the urban poor in the first half of the nineteenth century, grasped the idea that literacy posed a threat to political stability, as Tories and slaveholders had concluded. But more important, they began to see that literacy, or more specifically the control of it, could serve as a means to discipline and regulate habits and character.

#### *The Common-School Movement*

Horace Mann's crusade for a system of publicly supported common schools demonstrates the extent to which schooling transformed literacy from a tool of participation in public life into an instrument of social control. For the coalition of reformers and industrialists Mann skillfully brought together in the 1840s, schooled literacy represented an investment in human capital. The pervasive drills of nineteenth-century schools, in which teachers assumed managerial rather than pedagogical roles, taught not only grammar and mechanical correctness but also how to accept supervision, follow directions, and concentrate on tedious and repetitive tasks. But if the routines of schooling embodied the work rhythms of an

emerging capitalist order, the common schools did not simply impose a new regime of industrial discipline. As industrial capitalism took hold and the spread of the factory system transformed society, the schooling of literacy in the common schools provided a strategic site for the renegotiation of cultural hegemony.

According to Mann, universal public education offered the "balance wheel of the social machinery." The purpose of schooled literacy, as one advocate put it, was to enable the poor "to look upon the distinctions of society without envy" and to be "taught to understand that they are open to him as well as to others and to respect them for this reason" (quoted in Curti 93). Mann's vision of the common school as an egalitarian corrective to the "domination of capital and the servility of labor" finally collided with the stubborn facts of increasing capital accumulation and class stratification, but the ideology of equal opportunity offered, as it were, an imaginary relationship to the actual conditions of a transformed social order. As formerly independent producers turned into wage laborers and a permanent proletariat, the farmers, artisans, and mechanics who had constituted the middling classes of the colonial and early national periods looked to the common schools as their best chance to avoid proletarianization, to join the newly formed middle classes, and to recoup their threatened status through hard work, intelligence, and entrepreneurial drive. As the "middle" in middle class was redefined by larger social forces — no longer an equilibrium between the extremes of the wealthy and the poor but rather an upwardly mobile strata — Americans increasingly came to identify their hopes and aspirations with the free schools and a system of universal public education.

The rise of the common-school movement, then, must be seen in light of wider, complicated changes in the class structure of American society, and especially in the context of the cultural anxieties of the new middle classes. The common schools certainly represent an important experiment in democratic education, but they also signal a critical transformation of the cultural meaning of literacy. The "linguistic insecurity" of the mid-nineteenth century — manifested in the growing emphasis on grammar instruction, the proliferation of self-help manuals teaching proper speech and writing, the public discussion of the "state" of American English, and the formation of local literary societies — served to put literacy in crisis by identifying linguistic propriety with social status and redefining literacy as a token of middle-class respectability. The popular literacy of the early nineteenth century was a democratic tool, a literary and intellectual resource to know one's rights, to defend against monopolies and special interests, and to resist unjust and illegitimate authority. By midcentury, however, the extension of education through the common school appropriated the popular cultural force of literacy, domesticating and channeling it into controlled and regulated practices. "The major goal of mass schooling," Jenny Cook-Gumperz writes, "was thus to control literacy, not to promote it; to control both the forms of expression and the behavior which accompany the move into literacy" (28).

Thus, schooled literacy emerged in the mid-nineteenth century as both a means to regulate popular literacy and a social marker to divide the literate from the illiterate, the worthy poor from the unworthy, "us" from "them." A moral consensus took root that transformed the popular activities of reading and writing into schooled practices and a kind of cultural capital, the possession of which signified an individual's assimilation into mainstream middle-class culture. Literacy increasingly came to be seen not as a practical tool for everyday affairs or an intellectual resource against injustice but as a measure of the person. By the 1840s, prison officials and educators noted that the prison population had a higher rate of illiteracy than the general population, and throughout the nineteenth century reformers linked illiteracy to crime and poverty. Illiteracy no longer meant simply the inability to read and write but was refigured as the cause of idleness, intemperance, and improvidence — a measure and mark of moral failure.

*Progressive Education and the  
Reorientation of Reading and Writing*

One of the ironies of late nineteenth-century America is that the widespread availability of affordable reading matter — made possible by cost-reducing innovations in publishing, transportation, and marketing — only raised the level of cultural anxiety about literacy. The publishing boom, as Burton J. Bledstein notes, not only disseminated the printed word on an unprecedented scale, it also served "to encourage confusion and frustration that gave way to self-doubt and mistrust" (78). Vice societies, social hygienists, and educators warned the public about the dangers of unregulated reading material, and increasingly librarians, teachers, and public spokespersons were expected to help middle-class Americans distinguish wholesome from degenerate reading material. The emergence of what we call the "reading public" takes place through a process of social atomization, whereby readers are constructed as isolated and private consumers, dependent on the judgment of professional writers, reviewers, librarians, and educators to regulate their reading habits. Unlike earlier forms of popular literacy that enlarged the public sphere of discourse and extended opportunities to participate in public life, by the late nineteenth century a reorientation of literacy practices had occurred that privatized the act of reading and recast readers as clients whose primary obligation was to trust the judgment of experts and professionals.

This growing reliance on professionals was also enacted within the schools and led to the second major transformation of schooled literacy. By the early twentieth century, with the rise of progressive education, the introduction of a professional bureaucracy produced significant changes in the organization and nature of public education. Progressive educators developed a standardized curriculum, plans of instruction, and testing systems that made the evaluation of skills and the measurement of abilities possible. With the development of ability and intelligence testing in the early part of

the century, schools increasingly became what Joel Spring calls a "sorting machine" to rank students and certify outcomes. As comprehensive high schools spread and the leaving age of compulsory schooling was raised, universal mass education gained in social power as the preeminent legitimating agency of an individual's success and the arbiter of attainment. The democratic ideology of the common school—where all students had studied the same curriculum—gave way to ability grouping in elementary schools and tracking in middle schools and high schools, overseen by counselors and testing experts. The "student-centered" approach of progressive education promised greater flexibility in curriculum as well as the instruction needed to handle the influx of working-class immigrants into public secondary education. In practice, however, it produced not greater equality but greater stratification between classes and ethnic groups. The Superintendent of Schools in Cleveland offered a typical argument for educational stratification in 1910:

It is obvious that the educational needs of children in a district where the streets are well paved and clean, where the homes are spacious and surrounded by lawns and trees, where the language of the child's play-fellows is pure, and where life in general is permeated with the spirit and ideals of America—it is obvious that the educational needs of such a child are radically different from those of a child who lives in a foreign and tenement section. (quoted in Bowles and Gintis 192)

As Cook-Gumperz argues, "the transformation of literacy from a moral virtue into a cognitive skill is the key to the twentieth century changes in the ideology of literacy" (37). Reading and writing, of all the measurable skills, appeared to offer the surest means to evaluate and rank student aptitude and performance. As the psychometric testing paradigm lent a scientific authority to the reforms of progressive education, educators began to represent literacy as a decontextualized set of skills developed through a uniform and universal process that mirrored deeper cognitive abilities and that could be measured by neutral and objective testing mechanisms with national norms. In this way, not only was literacy redefined as a unitary standardized abstraction instead of variable concrete practices, but students were also refigured, no longer simply as moral subjects but now as accounting units and batteries of test scores. Unlike earlier pluralistic forms of popular literacy, where the value of reading and writing had resided in their actual uses, literacy acquired a kind of exchange value that represented measurable cognitive abilities. If the common-school movement moralized literacy into a form of cultural capital that divided middle-class from working-class students, progressive education converted this cultural capital into the form of credentials.

It should not be surprising, then, that the literacy crisis of 1890 to 1920 articulated middle-class anxieties released by the emergence of a credentialed

society. The transformation of entrepreneurial capitalism into the present corporate order produced not only massive industrialization, increased proletarianization, and heightened class conflict. As the monopolies absorbed small-scale producers, there occurred a shift of the middle classes from self-employed operators of family-owned businesses and enterprises to salaried employees, the white-collar workers of the huge, vertically integrated corporations. In contrast to the entrepreneurial boom times in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the middle classes aspired to rise from rags to riches on the strength of frugality, practical knowledge, and small-scale capital investment, the corporate order of the twentieth century elaborated complex hierarchical bureaucracies, creating thousands of clerical, advertising, sales, bookkeeping, middle-level management, and low-level supervisory positions. At the same time, professional associations of lawyers, doctors, dentists, and engineers sought to regularize standards of training in professional schools, leading to the institution of national boards and accrediting agencies to certify the credentials of individual practitioners in their respective fields.

With these broad social changes, the middle class turned from petty proprietors into a professional-managerial stratum within the corporate order. The literacy crisis of 1890 to 1920, like the crisis of the 1840s, concentrated middle-class fears of loss of status, downward mobility, and the prospect of sinking into the working class or urban poor. These fears, moreover, led the middle classes to identify their private interests with an increasingly stratified and meritocratic order in education. Redefined as a cognitive instead of a moral measure of the individual, literacy was simultaneously reaffirmed as the middle classes' primary hope of upward mobility, social status, and respectability—a cultural marker to divide them and their credentials from the poor and the working class below.

### Conclusion

My argument is that the discourse that puts literacy in crisis during the mid-nineteenth century and again at the turn of the century is a discourse about the ongoing crisis of the middle class. Fear of downward mobility and loss of status has repeatedly been displaced and refigured as a fear of the alien and the other—whether Irish Catholics in the 1840s, southern and eastern Europeans in the 1890s, or Hispanics and Asians in the 1980s—repeatedly linking middle-class anxieties to nativist sentiments, such as the current new-right campaign to make English the official language, and the backlash against affirmative-action, equal-opportunity, and open-admissions programs in higher education.

Left-wing critics such as Shor, Ohmann, and Sledd have effectively exposed prevailing representations of the current literacy crisis. This is important work but it should not obscure the fact that literacy *is* in crisis in contemporary America and, as I have tried to show here, has been repeatedly

in the past. However, it is not deteriorating educational standards or the needs of a new high-tech postindustrial economy that have put literacy in crisis but the appropriation of literacy by a stratified educational apparatus and the wider meritocratic order of a credentialed society. Part of the ideological work performed by the discourse of crisis has been the privatization of literacy—the representation of reading and writing not as means of enlarging the public sphere of discourse and political participation but as personal credentials, forms of cultural capital, and articulations of a wider ideology of possessive individualism. What is posed, finally, by the literacy crisis of the mid-1970s is the fate of American democracy and of the capacity of its citizens to think in terms not of private interests but of the public good.

In an era of diminished expectations, persistent economic anxiety, and a restricted political discourse, imagination and political courage are required if literacy is to be re-represented as an intellectual resource against injustice, a means to ensure democratic participation in public life. As writing teachers, theorists, researchers, and program administrators, we are already deeply implicated in the reward system, division of labor, and meritocratic order that have privatized literacy. Our own academic positions are authorized by the hegemony of expertise that legitimates a stratified and antidemocratic educational system. It is now time for us to contest the prevailing representations of literacy and the systems of tracking in secondary schools and of selective admissions in higher education that literacy measures, regulates, and certifies. To counter the growing privatization of education, we need to revive the movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s to democratize higher education through open admissions to *all* colleges and universities, free tuition, and a livable student stipend.

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