’Dear Nolly …’

Ruminations on the effects and practice of literacy in traditional societies

by Dennis Malone

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This paper was prepared for a Readings in Language Education course taught by Dr. H. S. Bhola at the University of Indiana.

The ten questions that follow have been formed on the basis of issues underlying certain articles appearing in Notes on Literacy (abbreviated as NOL) and the major issues raised in the readings listed in the bibliography. [Note in passing that I have rejected the possibility of directing the inquiries to “Dear Silly” (based on SIL) in favor of the less demeaning “Dear Nolly” (based on NOL).]

Dear Nolly,

Recently I had a discussion (that is, argument) with a Peace Corps worker in the same language area I work in. I explained to her that by promoting local language literacy, we (that is, SIL) are helping to preserve local cultures and languages. She said that we are doing just the opposite! Which one of us is right? (signed) Anxiously Waiting

Dear A. W.,

It all depends on what you mean by “preserving?” The linguist Peter Mühlhäusler contends that the introduction of vernacular literacy is as destructive of “traditional modes of expression and life” as would (1994). Notes on Literacy, 20(2).

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be the introduction of literacy in a foreign language (Kulick and Stroud 1993). If that is true, it would seem your PC friend is right.

However, Mühlhäusler’s view echoes what Brian Street (1993) denounces as the desire to preserve tradition as a way to resist change, to “fossilize” a minority language and culture. If she truly believes that traditional cultures can be preserved intact, unchanged, then there is no point in continuing your discussion (that is, argument).

I will assume that she realizes that cultures inevitably change (or she would not have joined the Peace Corps), from within as well as from without. In most traditional societies, literacy is an activity—or a process, or “technology” (Ong 1982)—that arrives from the outside. Both you and your friend seem to see literacy as a kind of self-contained innovation that impacts a culture either destructively or beneficially. The implication is that somehow “literacy” acts—positively or negatively—upon the members of the minority language group who, for their part, play a passive role in the process.

This is the view espoused to some extent by Goody and Watt (1968) and others who ascribe fundamental changes in human mental processes as a result of alphabetic literacy. Ong (1982) contends that the cognitive processes of people from “primary oral societies” (those as yet untouched by literacy) are significantly, irreversibly altered when they acquire the skills of reading and writing.

Others disagree. Scribner and Cole (1988) argue that literacy is a much more complicated process, one which is itself amenable to change as people use it for their own purposes. On the basis of her studies of Pacific cultures, Finnegan (1988) contends that some oral societies have embraced literacy in such a way as to effect an interactive relationship between orality and literacy in which both are altered but still remain valued in the community. Kulick and Stroud (1993) contend that Gapun villagers of Papua New Guinea use the words of Christian scriptures in the same way they used words spiritually in their traditional culture, that is, as sources of power, not as vehicles for a message.

In other words, literacy is not an autonomous technology but a socially constructed process (compare Cook-Gumperz 1986; Heath 1983; and others). People themselves are acting upon this new technology, shaping and forming it to fit their own needs and desires (which may not be what you, the literacy specialist, intended or desired). Yours, therefore, is not a question of “who’s right?” as much as it is a question of what is literacy’s relationship with the society and culture in which you live and work. Whether or not the language and culture will continue as components of a dynamic, viable society is a complex process of which literacy is a potentially significant factor.

Dear Nolly,

We are working among ethnolinguistic minorities that have only a relatively recent history of contact with literacy. The national government is asking us to help plan a literacy program for the whole country. Which is better: a nationwide mass literacy campaign over a relatively short period of time, or a community-based program that may take years? What would you do? (signed) Two Confused

Dear T. C,

Your question is much larger than I can adequately handle in a “Dear Nolly” column. Allow me to put aside my own questions regarding your available resources, time constraints, available personnel (trainers as well as trainees), transportation, and so forth, and concentrate simply on the choice in program methodology.

H. S. Bhola (1984) is probably the most articulate spokesperson for the “campaigning for literacy” model. Underlying the campaign approach is a sense of urgency about illiteracy. Campaigners judge illiteracy to be a mammoth problem that requires a proportionately massive response. In their view, small local programs, community based or otherwise, are piecemeal and ineffective. The phrase “eradication of illiteracy” abounds and Bhola cites one author who characterizes that effort as not only “an end in itself, but as an end which must be attained at once and at all costs… . ” (1984:31). The advantage of the mass campaign is that, because it sets out a specific, not-too-extended time frame, resources are more readily allocated to it, personnel are more readily committed to it, and the objective of universal adult literacy is more likely to be attained. (1984:35) Bhola also includes accounts of mass literacy campaigns in eight countries: the former USSR, Vietnam, China, Cuba, Burma, Brazil, Tanzania, and Somalia.

But there are those, myself included, who wince a bit at the condition of not being literate, couched in a phrase usually reserved for plagues and fatal diseases. Brian Street (1987) characterizes the mass campaign approach as impervious to the varieties and complexities of local literacies. By Street’s estimation, this method implies that the diverse ethnolinguistic minorities are cultures so shallow and unimportant as to be readily accommodated by a single large-scale campaign (often with a single set of materials).

Rogers (1992) suggests another problem with mass campaigns. According to his “five-fold model” of adult learning for development, an innovation begins with the “existing state” of the community(ies), moves then to a stage of “awareness” of a need for change, then to the developments of “knowledge, skills, understanding”, then on to the “direct action” designed to bring about the “desired change.” According to Rogers, mass campaigns, because of their self-imposed time constraints, necessarily shortchange the education and training stage that result in “knowledge, skills, and understanding” (1992:121). As a result, the literacy that mass campaigns produce does not last.

Personally, I agree with Rogers and Street. Community-based programs take longer, but they have the potential to survive once the initial “push” is over. They can survive because they depend upon community members to plan, staff, support, and evaluate the programs. The adult educators or literacy specialists may leave (almost certainly will leave) but the trained community leaders will remain. They are already home.

P.S. Check out Robert Armove’s chapter in Perspectives on literacy for his evaluation of “The Nicaraguan national literacy crusade of 1980.”

Dear Nolly,

UNESCO always emphasizes the need to promote functional literacy, literacy that can be of immediate use to adult neoliterates to improve their life situations. Do you agree with that emphasis? (signed) Functionally Perplexed

Page 3.
Dear Funky,

Maybe. It depends what you mean by “functional literacy.” And finding the definition is a circuitous process. Do you have a few minutes?

Kenneth Levine (1982) has written an interesting article in which he points out that “functional literacy” is often “used to justify everything and anything connected with basic skills education for adults” (1982:249). The meaning of the phrase has become elastic.

Levine traces the history of “functional literacy” as a term, showing its roots in a desire “to obtain the active participation of the people themselves in shaping their own future” (1982:251). But as UNESCO worked toward implementing a large-scale assault on world illiteracy, the definition of “functionally literate” also changed. UNESCO defined a functional literate as a person whose literacy abilities allowed her to participate in the literacy activities considered normal in her society, and then (probably for the purpose of quantifying the world literacy situation) equated functional literacy to three years of formal schooling. Then, in conjunction with UNESCO’s Experimental World Literacy Program (EWLP) in 1964, functional literacy became closely linked with economic development. Your definition derives from UNESCO’s 1965 Final Report from the Tehran Conference: “The very process of learning to read and write should be made an opportunity for acquiring information that can immediately be used to improve living standards” (1982:254).

But, as you are probably aware, the EWLP failed rather spectacularly to reach its goal, and, by 1975, had enabled only 12 percent of the one million illiterates involved to gain “functional literacy.” This failure was attributed to too great an emphasis on the economic component. “The concept of functionality … comprises not only economic and productivist dimensions … but also political, social, and cultural dimensions” (1982:255–256).

Levine associates the appeal of “functional literacy” to the theory of “human capital” that was in vogue in the 1950s and 1960s. This theory produced the misconceptions about literacy and economic development that scuttled ELWP, namely, that a literacy level above functionality earns money and that the more literate a society is, the greater its per capita value. But Levine points out that “value” of literacy is more likely to go down than up, when diffused across the population. The minimal levels of literacy implied in “functional,” if achieved, are unlikely to change anything. He cites Hirsch’s analogy that “once some people stand on tiptoe in order to get a better view, others will be forced to do the same, everyone ending up in their original, relative positions” (1982:259).

Another difficulty arises when the social aspects of literacy are taken seriously. Literacy is socially constructed. [Cook-Gumperz (1986), Heath (1983), Finnegan (1986), Scribner and Cole (1981), all present compelling evidence for this view from widely different contexts.] Literacy is a two-way process and “cannot be reduced to the question of the fluency with which an individual is capable of reading a newspaper; it also and equally a matter of the information the newspaper contains” (Levine 1982:263). Thus, literacy is seen as the ability to obtain and exchange written information; and functional literacy becomes “the possession of, or access to, the competences [sic] and information required to accomplish those transactions entailing reading and writing in which an individual wishes—or is compelled—to engage” (Levine 1982:263–264).

This newer definition of literacy also affects the definition of illiteracy: people are illiterate if they do not possess or have access to information they need. Authors, too, can be “illiterate” if what they write deceives, obscures, or misleads. (I am reminded of Pa Joad’s comment in Steinbeck’s Grapes of Wrath, when he observed that he did not know much about the value of literacy but every time someone showed up to read him a piece of paper, something was taken away from him!)

But we still have unanswered questions. Kazemek (1985) contends that literacy is not simply a transaction. It also entails poetic and expressive functions: “my conception of functional literacy includes the ability to act within the world of texts” (1985:334). Her own experience also questions the notion that, for the neoliterate, poetic and expressive functions must be relegated to some postliteracy future. But Kazemek’s literacy is an ongoing process that requires significantly more time than is usually accorded functional literacy programs.

The issues Kazemek raises, are the same as the lofty definitions with which UNESCO began its affair with functional literacy (Levine 1982:251). Hers are the concerns of a person reared in a literate society, with a literate bias that can barely imagine a people who cull deeply satisfying “poetic” and “expressive” treasures from their own oral traditions.

So, to answer your question, I do agree with the emphasis on functional literacy, provided that its implementation takes into account the functions that members of the society need and want.

Dear Nolly,

What kind of impact is our introduction of literacy likely to have on the way the people in this traditional Melanesian society think? (signed) Concerned In New Caledonia

Dear CINC,

A good question, but the jury is still out. The scholars who have studied the effects of literacy on cognitive development in general have arrived at varying conclusions. There are only a few who have dealt specifically with traditional societies. Perhaps our best approach will be for me to summarize some of the latter’s findings (both theoretical and practical), share with you some of my own thoughts and experience, and then let you pick out what seems to apply best to your own situation.

Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria, two Russian pioneers in the field of cognitive psychology, arranged an expedition in the 1930s to Soviet Uzbekistan in order “to study the psychological changes that followed the rapid and radical socioeconomic and cultural changes taking place” there. Vygotsky had already theorized that interrelationship of thought and language held the key to understanding cognitive development in children. He felt that the development of our higher mental functions could be traced to the influence of various sign systems (for example, written language) which aided (“mediated”) that development and which were inextricably connected with the social and cultural context of the individual.

Luria, who conducted most of the research, found evidence to support Vygotsky’s theory by presenting nonliterate, unschooled Uzbekistani peasants with several types of logical reasoning tests, including syllogisms. (An often cited one, goes something like this: “All bears in the North are white. Rubaskova Village is in the North. What color are the bears in Rubaskova?”) Luria found that these peasants were either unwilling or unable to reason from the abstracted premise of the syllogism and make the “logical” (1994). Notes on Literacy, 20(2).
deduction. Instead, they would reply only that they did not live in Rubaskova nor had they ever been there, and thus could not answer the question. However, when the same syllogisms were presented to literate members of the collective who had been schooled or formally trained, they had little hesitation in providing the logical deduction (“On the basis of your words, the bears are white”). Vygotsky and Luria concluded that their speculations had been correct and that the introduction of literacy and schooling results in a transformation of cognitive functioning from situation-dependent to abstract.

In the early 1960s, Jack Goody and Ian Watt collaborated on an article titled “The consequences of literacy” in which they traced the historical roots of alphabetic literacy (as contrasted with the hieroglyphic literacy of the Egyptians and logographic literacy of the Chinese and Japanese). They concluded that the Greek development of alphabetic literacy led to the intellectual achievements for which Greek civilization is primarily remembered. In fact, they go so far as to propose a direct causal connection between writing and logic. They would probably suggest to you that as New Caledonians becomes literate, they will begin a slow process of developing an historical sense, a critical attitude toward the past (especially toward their myths), social stratification , and a growth in individual, solitary activity.

Walter Ong, a Jesuit scholar, writing after Goody and Watt, contrasted the concepts of orality and literacy. Traditional societies with no significant contact with literacy he terms “primary oral.” Although he describes this primary oral state sympathetically and in depth, he nevertheless contends that

… orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy, as will be seen, is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science, but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself (Ong 1982:15).

Ong also contends that writing restructures consciousness because it provides for “context-free” discourse (something Luria’s Uzbekistani peasants could not conceive). He also suggests that the introduction of literacy into a primary oral society can have significance not generally considered by those of us from literate cultures, such as regarding writing as having secret or magical power, or regarding it as dangerous.

Paul and Edna Headland, SIL colleagues in Colombia, told me that the Tunebo people there consider writing dangerous enough that members of the society must undergo a ritual cleansing after any contact with paper. In Papua New Guinea, Don Kulick and Peter Stroud [cited in Brian Street (ed.) 1993] contend that the people in the Sepik village in which they did linguistic and ethnographic studies considered various written scripture portions as possessing power aside from the message of the words. These understandings are not necessarily terminal states in regard to literacy; more likely, Ong would consider them simply way stations in the slow transition from orality to literacy.

Following up Luria findings in the 1970s, Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) studied the Vai people of Liberia, because the Vai had developed their own syllabary and had been using it for over 100 years. As Vai script was an indigenous literacy, transmitted informally person-to-person, the Vai presented a unique experimental situation: the existence of Vai speakers who were unschooled but (1994). Notes on Literacy, 20(2).
literate, allowing the researchers to separate and control the literacy and schooling variables. Scribner and Cole were thus able to follow up on Luria’s unsatisfactory research, where schooled and unschooled, literate and nonliterate, young and old were all tested together. Their findings did not support the claim made by Goody and Watt that literacy led directly to context-independent, abstract thought. Rather, their data supported a conclusion that schooling, not literacy, was the probable causal factor, as Vai literates who had had no schooling did not score significantly higher on abstract reasoning tests than did their nonliterate Vai counterparts. I doubt that Scribner and Cole would go so far as to suggest that if you were able to confine your New Caledonian literacy effort to a one-on-one, informal transfer of skills, that the people of those traditional societies will experience no significant cognitive change. All they are willing to conclude, and rightfully so, is that they did not find significant cognitive change among unschooled Vai literates.

I hope that this brief (a relative term) overview of current thinking is helpful. I have personal concerns for the characterization of primary oral people’s cognitive functions as somehow inferior to those of us who come from literate cultures. Once, while attending an interclan event with Rambai Keruwa, an articulate and highly respected mother tongue Kaugel man, fluent in English and in Tok Pisin, a national lingua franca, I asked what was being said by the elders of the clans as they spoke. He replied that he could not pick up the gist of the discussion because, understanding all the words, he could not catch the meaning because of the intricate and obscure metaphors and plays on words that were being used. I imagine that a high degree of cognitive ability is required in the construction of the oral labyrinths that have been described to me.

I include that observation in this reply, because whatever the impact of literacy as a technology upon the cognitive functions of the people you serve, their preliterate intellectual attainments ought to insure them against being expected to expend the time and energy required for literacy acquisition before there are texts for their eyes that bring them thoughts and words more profound and rich and meaningful than those they formerly received only with their ears.

Dear Nolly,

Is it necessary that a literacy program for adults in a preliterate society include both reading and writing? I mean, can we just teach reading? (signed) OneOrTheOtherOrBoth

Dear O,

I am curious why you ask that question. My first reaction is to ask, “Do the people want to read and not to write?” I mean, don’t reading and writing “go together”? Not necessarily. At least, not in seventeenth century Sweden.

Graff (1987) sketches a “success story” of mass literacy in Sweden following the Lutheran Reformation. There, the church and state joined to make literacy a legal requirement. “Within a century, remarkably high levels of literacy existed—without any concomitant development of formal schooling or economic or cultural development that demanded functional or practical employment of literacy, and in a manner that led to literacy defined by reading and not by writing” (1987:13).

(My only quarrel with the passage above is that the Swedish literacy is described as lacking any “functional or practical” use in their society. I assume that is because the sole reading material was the Bible and church-related tracts and catechisms. And, if the people only read them because it was legislated that they read them, or if they only read them for amusement, I probably would agree. But I suspect that they—at least some of them—read because they wanted to know what to do and how to speak and how to think, each day, in their real-life world, and they believed that the words they read were trustworthy guides. How is that, then, less practical than someone reading the directions on a label of insecticide? Forgive me. I digress.)

Closer to our time and place, Scribner and Cole (1981) report that, although reading and writing “were inextricably linked” and that “people who indicated they could read Vai also reported that they could write it” (1981:67–68), the Vai specialists who helped evaluate the demographic information being obtained insisted that reading, rather than writing Vai, be the only criterion for establishing whether or not a Vai person was literate.

Writing requires certain cognitive skills that are acquired with difficulty. Scribner and Cole (1981) cite Vygotsky’s observation that the written message is “speech without an interlocutor”—that the writer must, along with her message, explain the context in which the message is being delivered in order to be intelligible (1981:204).

Heath (1983) describes the many social and practical uses to which reading and writing are put by the residents of a rural community in South Carolina. In one example, she relates how Trackton people will take a defective item back to the store and be told by the manager that it is not the store’s responsibility, “You’ll have to write to the manufacturer.” The people return home and assure their neighbors that they will not ever patronize that store again, but no letter is ever written. (Today, perhaps it does not need to be written if the manufacturer has an 800 number … but that is a whole different issue!) But in the end, it must be the people themselves who decide whether or not their current and foreseeable future situation requires writing literacy as well as reading literacy. Different groups within the community may have different needs. In the Kaugel language area of Papua New Guinea, for example, Christian evangelists and pastors requested a literacy class to help improve the fluency of their oral reading of scriptures on Sunday mornings. They expressed no need or desire to practice writing.

Dear Nolly,

I spent a lot of time and effort developing a culturally sensitive primer for use with adults in the Fululianpoc literacy program, but none of them are interested in using it to learn to read. They say they want to learn to read and they start, but no one ever finishes. What could be the cause of their lack of interest? (signed) Worried and Worn Out Too

Dear WW II,

Let me begin by reassuring you that you are not the first outsider to develop a primer that does not “resonate” with the local people. (I am inferring from “developing a culturally sensitive primer” that you are an expatriate literacy worker, as indigenous literacy workers do not usually use the terms like “culturally sensitive.” If I am wrong, please forgive me, and disregard everything that follows.)

Scribner and Cole (1988), who did their research among the Vai people of Liberia, write that their … evidence indicates that social organization creates the conditions for a variety of literacy activities, and that different types of text reflect different social practices. With respect to adult literacy, a functional approach appears more appropriate than a developmental one. The loose generalization of developmental models developed for work with children to instructional programs with adolescents and adults is certainly questionable (1988:69).

A primer approach, even with adult content, is just such a “developmental” approach. Adults generally seek literacy because they perceive distinct needs within their personal, social, and cultural context for literacy skills. You might consider setting your primer aside for the time being and, with the help of your indigenous colleagues, try to discover local uses of literacy.

In my own personal experience among the Kaugel people of Papua New Guinea—a people whose earliest experience with literacy dates from the 1950s—literacy practices include reading their children’s “clinic cards” (birth and health records), reading campaign posters and ballots during provincial and national elections, reading letters from children and relatives in distant locations, reading labels and price tags in stores, “reading” playing cards (a popular sign system especially among the men), reading the Kaugel New Testament and church songbooks, marking ballots, writing letters to distant children and relatives, making signs for local trade stores and local commercial vehicles, writing lists of names of people to be compensated at funeral feasts or weddings, and, perhaps, many others. All of these are “real-life” texts that might better serve your adult literacy program than a primer.

The trend today is away from thinking of literacy as an autonomous process, unaffected by local culture or social structure, or as a set of skills and competencies that can be imparted simply by arranging for the appropriate educational format. Paulo Freire, in his book Pedagogy of the oppressed, was one of the first to insist that adult literacy must be a vehicle for the liberation of the exploited sectors of society.

More recently, Alan Rogers (1992) proposes that adult literacy ought not to be isolated at all from adult education. Unlike young people, adults do not need to learn in order to become contributing members of society. They already are established members of the society. Therefore, “adult education covers the teaching of literacy to adults but it is much wider than that” (1992:20). Rogers also notes the “concept of distance” that has negatively affected development-related literacy materials in other parts of the third world.

Every learner places the material with which they are confronted at a specific location within their own sense of reality. The distance between where they place this new material and where they place themselves is usually expressed in terms of space (it is of ‘remote interest’ or a matter of ‘close concern’, etc.) or in terms of social relationships (it is ‘alien’, etc.). If Developmental material (literacy or new farming practices or new habits of hygiene, for example) is placed far from themselves, these practices will be regarded as ‘culturally other’, and thus learning them will be more difficult … (1992:140).

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That is not to say, throw away your primer. Rather, I would suggest—if you have not already—step back and try to see what Rogers would call the “existing state” of Fululianpoc literacy, and what needs for adult education adult literacy can serve.

Dear Nolly,

I am an adult literacy specialist working in an ethnolinguistic minority group in Africa. I know that the introduction of literacy will be difficult. I’d like to make the transition for the adults as smooth as possible. I am unclear, however, whether there is some way that the adult minds can be prepared for the literacy tasks, or whether the necessary cognitive changes are a natural result of the process of learning to read and write. Can you clarify this issue for me? (signed) Thoughtful

Dear T,

The background to your question implies that the adults you are working with live in what Walter Ong (1982) would call a “primary oral” society. Ong makes a distinction between orality (a term descriptive of all language and culture groups) and primary orality (a term applying only to those persons and societies totally unfamiliar with writing).

Perhaps the best approach here will be to try to understand in general what scholars consider to be the state of the primary oral mind and what changes, if any, are required for the acquisition of literacy skills. Then we will look at the more practical problem of how to put that knowledge to use.

We will skip over the “great divide” debate that has been going on for the past 25 years regarding the nature of the differences between the human mind in primary oral cultures and those in literate cultures, and what causes them. Instead, we will concentrate on what has been discovered in respect to orality. That should give you some cognitive behavior to verify or disprove in the adults that you are working with.

Theorists, like Jack Goody, Ian Watt, and Walter Ong see a clear, rather large distinction between orality and literacy (ergo, “the great divide”). In Goody and Watt’s influential essay, “The consequences of literacy” (1968), members of nonliterate societies are characterized as communicating “all beliefs and values, all forms of knowledge” in face-to-face communication between individuals and groups, knowledge that is stored only in human memory (1968:29). They use the term “homeostatic” to describe a social organization in which only items of social relevance are retained in memory while the rest is jettisoned (1968:30–31). They reject arguments that propose an absolute dichotomy between the ‘mythical’ thought of primitives and the ‘logico-empirical’ thought of civilized man” (1968:43), but suggest that there may be very distinct changes in the mental processes when writing is introduced, mainly in the separation of “history” from “myth” (1968:44). Below, are two passages that express what they believe are fundamental aspects of literate vis-à-vis nonliterate. The first relates to the ongoing, ever-increasing accumulation of written records and texts in literate societies.

… the literate individual has in practice so large a field of personal selection from the total cultural repertoire that the odds are strongly against experiencing the cultural tradition as any sort of patterned whole (1968:57–58).

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The second passage is a quote from Tolstoy’s *War and Peace,* in which the author describes a nonliterate mindset. Platon Karataev, a peasant

…did not, and could not, understand the meaning of words apart from their context. Every word and every action of his was the manifestation of an activity unknown to him, which was his life. but his life, as he regarded it, had no meaning as a separate thing. It had meaning only as part of a whole of which he was always conscious … (*1968*:61).

Ong (*1982*) points out that although individuals in primary oral societies “possess and practice great wisdom … they do not ‘study’.

They learn by apprenticeship … by discipleship … by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials, by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection—not by study in the strict sense (*1982*:9).

Ong cites Malinowski’s observation of another aspect of people in primary oral cultures, namely, that language to them is a “mode of action and not simply a countersign of thought” (*1982*:32). Oral peoples consider names to convey power. Kaugel people of the highlands of Papua New Guinea rarely divulge their “true” name to strangers for fear that it can then be “used” against them. I read also (I forget the source, perhaps *Luria 1976*), that a certain peasant could readily accept the revelation that human scientists had discovered how to measure distances to the stars and how to calculate their weight; what most mystified him was how they had learned the names of the stars! In a similar vein, Kulick and Stroud (*1993*) contend that Gapun villagers of Papua New Guinea use the words of Christian scriptures in the same way they used words spiritually in their traditional culture, that is, as sources of power not as vehicles for a message.

Perhaps you can see how a “great divide” theory arises from contrasting oral and literate: oral speech is natural, writing is artificial; oral speech has unconscious depths; writing is only a conscious act. (You can talk in your sleep, but you cannot write!) The heritage of an oral tradition is passed by word of mouth with the premium on the mnemonic and rhythmic patterns, repetitions, proverbs and formulary expressions that ensure the its essential survival. The literate heritage consists of texts that are static and, if preserved, are as open to scrutiny as when they were composed, a feature often leads to skepticism as inconsistencies and contradictions are perceived.

Ruth Finnegan (*1988*) presents an interesting view of the orality/literacy debates. She studied traditionally oral cultures in the Pacific and the impact of literacy upon their oral traditions. Her conclusion is that there is simply not enough evidence to support any theory suggesting “definitive consequences for human society and experience” caused either by orality or by literacy (*1988*:14).

Moreover, Finnegan investigates the compositional procedures of what she terms “oral literature.” (Ong goes ballistic over that term, but it is a red herring here!) If she is correct, the primarily oral society you work in most likely has an oral “literature” which may yield some material for a literacy program. (*1994*). *Notes on Literacy,* 20(2).
Finnegan takes issue with four basic assertions that have been made about oral composition:

1) The “text” of an oral composition changes depending on the occasion of its performance

2) The form of composition is composition-in-the-act of performance (not prior to, or separated from)

3) The “literature” is transmitted in the same way it is composed (that is, not memorized word-for-word)

4) No “authentic” or “correct” version exists for items of oral literature (1988:88–89)

Finnegan submits evidence that, at least in the Pacific, there is indeed a rehearsal of oral literature prior to performance, in order to get it right, a distinct concern for verbatim memorization, which supports the idea of “authentic” or “correct” versions (or, at least, the version we want to be able to sing publicly together without embarrassing ourselves). She shares an anecdote from Collocott in which a Tongan poet chanted a 101-line original poem as a gift to a poet friend, who then, in response, thanks the giver by repeating the poem verbatim. (That kind of feat of memory, apparently, is only ascribed to the poets, not the average Tongan.)

But I think that the potentially most practical discovery that Finnegan makes, is of the interaction between the oral and the literate as they mingled in the Pacific. Rather than support the common assumption that the “technology of writing” is “intrinsically opposed to or even ‘kills’ oral literary expression, traditional Pacific societies are demonstrating that the writing down of oral traditions (especially during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries) was a “formative and creative act rather than merely neutral collecting” which eventually “fed into the oral literary tradition. In the South Pacific, it seems, these two were not … two separate and opposed modes but, both now and in the past, form part of one dynamic in which both written and oral forms interact” (1988:122).

The insights from Goody and Watt and Ong should provide you with a better, perhaps more sensitive, understanding of the difficulties facing neoliterate villagers as they try out the technology of writing and reading. For a society, the transition from oral to literate is a time-consuming process (for example, hundreds of years in the West).

Finnegan’s perspective, however, can be put to immediate trial. If I were you (or even if I were me, back in the Western Pacific!), I would try persuading a core (corps?) of able-bodied/minded indigenous literate folks to begin recording their oral “literature”—especially the song—and try to work that into the material of their early literacy experience. Their familiarity and deep affective associations with the stories and songs would make that their cognitive adjustment that much easier. It is worth a try!

Dear Nolly,

I just received a request from the minister of education here to provide his office with statistics for the number of literates in our language group. At what point is a person judged to be literate? Are there any tests or set of criteria that you would recommend for judging adult literacy? (signed)

Statistically Desperate

Dear Stat D,


Page 12.
I am glad I am not in your shoes! (Isn’t that a depressing way to start a column designed to help our readers?) This is one of those bad news/not-so-bad news situations. It depends on whom you are talking to (or reading).

For example, John Bormuth wrote an influential (I think) article about 20 years ago, in which he sought to develop models for “identifying performance criteria that can serve as the goal of instructional programs and of the research and development programs that lead them” (Bormuth 1973:7). That is the bad news! Bormuth’s findings are well suited for Western high-tech societies and, although he includes some very interesting items, for example, his “taxonomy of literacy behaviors” (1973:19–21), this is not a solution that will make your minister of education very happy.

A much easier (but, I think, equally unsuitable) method is the one UNESCO used (perhaps, still uses) for developing their literacy statistics. They set (somewhat arbitrarily) a grade of formal education as equivalent to (“functional”) literacy. For example, just prior to the implementation of the Experimental World Literacy Program in 1965, three years of formal schooling was established as the benchmark for determining whether or not a person was literate. That, to me, is also bad news. As you are probably well aware—especially if formal education in your community is done in a language other than the local mother tongue(s)—most adults who have had even as much as six years of formal schooling will have lost their literacy abilities long since!

The not-so-bad news is that Scribner and Cole (1981), facing a similar situation of needing some kind of criteria for identifying literates for their research purposes among the Vai, developed a two-fold approach. First, they simply asked the adult (or child) if he or she were literate. If they said yes, they marked them as literate. This self-declaration was subsequently verified by a brief test of oral reading and reading comprehension, using a short text in the language of their self-declared literacy. In their experience, they found a nearly one-to-one correspondence between those who said they were literate and those who “passed” their test. The test, as I recall it, was scored on a scale of 1–4, so that they could assess relative literacy, but I would imagine that for your purposes you could make yours an is-or-Isn’t distinction.

Also, if you read Shirley Brice Heath (1983) or Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1986), along with Scribner and Cole (1988), you will probably want to use a text for your testing that corresponds directly with a type of literacy already in use in your community. You will be much more likely to get an accurate estimation of the literacy situation.

Happy quantifying!

Dear Nolly,

How does the distinction between “schooling” and “literacy” (as pertains to the purpose and effects of literacy) affect adult vernacular literacy programs in third world countries? (signed)

Downright Curious

Dear Downright Cur,

Your question is one of the key elements in the “great divide” debate (which I have skillfully avoided—almost—for the last eight columns). The “great divide” refers to the putative cognitive gulf that exists


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between literate and nonliterate societies. The distinction between schooling and literacy is one of the more prominent byproducts of that debate!

On the hunch that you are already somewhat familiar with the great divide theory—else why would you have mentioned the distinction between school and literacy?—let me paint a background in broad strokes.

For many years, scholars have been imputing large, very significant results to the practices of reading and writing. In the 1968 book, *Literacy in traditional societies*, Goody and Watt collaborated on a chapter titled, “The consequences of literacy” in which they summarily traced the history of literacy. They also came to some conclusions:

The present argument must, therefore, confine itself to suggesting that some of the crucial features of Western culture came into being in Greece soon after the existence, for the first time, of a rich urban society in which a substantial portion of the population was able to read and write; and that, consequently, the overwhelming debt of the whole of contemporary civilization to classical Greece must be regarded as in some measure the result, not so much of the Greek genius, as of the intrinsic differences between nonliterate (or protoliterate) and literate societies … (1968:55) and ….

The kinds of analysis involved in the syllogism, and in the other forms of logical procedure, are clearly dependent upon writing, indeed upon a form of writing sufficiently simple and cursive to make possible widespread and habitual recourse both to the recording of verbal statements and then to the dissecting of them (1968:67–68).

Walter Ong (1982) compiled a book of his essays, in which he sought to make clear the distinctions between what he called “primary orality” and literacy. However, he stated that, in spite of the power and art of verbal performances in oral cultures, human consciousness could not be extended by primary orality to reach its “fuller potential.”

In this sense, orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing. Literacy, as will be seen, is absolutely necessary for the development not only of science, but also of history, philosophy, explicative understanding of literature, and of any art, and indeed for the explanation of language (including oral speech) itself (1982:15).

Ong extended the “great divide” between nonliterate and literate considerably with statement such as this:

Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness (1982:78).

Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole (1981) published *The Psychology of Literacy* in which they described and evaluated their research findings among the Vai people of Liberia. The significance of their study is that the Vai people are possessors of their own script (a syllabary of some 200 phonetic characters).

Scribner and Cole were working on a hunch (that is, hypothesis) drawn from the work of Soviet psychologist A. R. Luria who had observed demonstrably different cognitive behavior between nonliterate peasants and literate peasants who had been to school or some other type of formal training. Was it literacy that caused the difference, or schooling? The Vai people offered a unique situation in which to seek answers to that question. Many Vai literates had learned their literacy informally (that is, no school). The results of their investigations disputed the conclusions of the great divide theorists like Goody, Watt, and Ong.

Our results are in direct conflict with persistent claims that “deep psychological differences” divide literate and nonliterate populations (see Maheu 1965). On no task—logic, abstraction, memory, communication—did we find all nonliterates performing at lower levels than all literates .... We can and do claim that literacy promotes skills among the Vai, but we cannot and do not claim that literacy is a necessary and sufficient condition for any of the skills we assessed (1981:251).

In short, Scribner and Cole did not find that literacy, per se, effected any dramatic or distinctive cognitive changes in the Vai script monoliterates. What did they find?

The most impressive finding is that formal schooling with instruction in English increased ability to provide a verbal explanation of the principles involved in performing the various tasks .... Speaking English never substituted for school variables, and on verbalization measures, school—not English reading scores—was the best predictor (1981:131).

They suggested, therefore, that schooling (Western style) is a confounding factor when comparing literates and nonliterates, and may well be the cause of the cognitive changes formerly attributed to the affects of literacy.

I am not thoroughly convinced myself. Scholars like Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and Jenny Cook-Gumperz (1986) present persuasive accounts of literacy as a socially constructed activity, which contrasts with “schooled literacy” which lend weight to Scribner and Cole’s perspectives. And theorists like Harvey Graff (1987) and Brian Street (1984; 1987; 1993) present revised historical perspectives, in part, on the basis of Scribner and Cole’s work.

But, it seems to me that the real argument against Goody and Watt is not supported best by the existence of literate people (that is, the Vai) who do not demonstrate special skill in abstract generalization and logic, but by the existence of people who engage in abstract generalization and logic but do not write! Until those people are identified, the question of the relationship of literacy to abstract thought remains moot (at least, for me).

How does the distinction between “schooling” and “literacy” affect adult vernacular literacy programs in third world countries? Probably more in the minds of the literacy program planners than in the adult neoliterates. If literacy is a socially constructed activity that adults engage in—not simply a technology acquired through carefully constructed educational activities—that should be reflected in the way in (1994). Notes on Literacy, 20(2).
which the program is implemented. The location, the training of instructors/facilitators, and the instructional materials to be used or prepared; all of those factors are affected by your understanding of what literacy is and what it does and how it does it.

But, I would advise that you make changes slowly. In my experience, even in the most isolated areas, nonliterates have definite expectations about learning literacy, and schools and classrooms are usually part of them. Before changing that feature, I would work very hard at discovering the kind of literacy skills the people need and use in their everyday, real-life situations, and, as far as possible, incorporate only those learning activities that correspond with them.

I hope that this helps you a bit, or at least gives you some other places to look for help.

References


See also [Gee 1991b](#) Bibliography (Literacy)


Citations


See also [Graff 1987b](#) Bibliography (Literacy) Citations


See also [Brice-Heath 1983](#) Bibliography (Literacy) Citations


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