Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications
and other research outputs

The Post

Book Section

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

Version: [not recorded]

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
http://www.wisc.edu/wisconsinpress/books/2433.htm

oro.open.ac.uk

Literacy as Social History: Its Past and Future

David Vincent

1)   The Post

We can date the beginning of the era of mass literacy quite precisely. In 1874 the Treaty of Berne was signed which led to the creation the following year of the Universal Postal Union (UPU).[1] The inhabitants of every country in Europe, together with Egypt and North America, were to be linked together in a common system of flat-rate postage, irrespective of geography or national boundary.[2] Manufacturer would be connected to customer, parent to child, lover to distant lover, through their common ability to read and to use a pen. For the local equivalent of a twenty-five centime stamp thoughts, feelings and information would be rapidly and securely conveyed along the dramatically improving communication networks of the modernizing world. In the words of the UPU's new journal, "there is a scarcely a single individual, however wretched, in any civilised country who has not, at least once in his life, been put in communication with his fellow creatures by means of the post." (Union Postale, 2, 1, Jan 1877, 16). The achievement was celebrated by contemporary commentators. As The Times wrote, "It is a literal truth that the Postal Union not only corresponds with the most advanced humanitarian spirit of the times, but is itself the most practical realization which human ingenuity has yet achieved of those floating aspirations towards universal brotherhood, regarded generally as of the nature of dreams, however decorative of the pages of poetic literature."[3](The Times Aug. 15, 1891)

In a way the UPU defines the dilemma which we now face. On the one hand it was an event of genuine and still largely neglected importance. Together with the International Telegraph Union founded ten years earlier it may be said to mark the beginning of global mass communication. It is not altogether surprising that its early history provoked such excitable rhetoric. But on the other hand it was merely one more vehicle for the inflated claims for the potential of literacy which have been so characteristic of the modern era. These claims are obvious targets. The little we know about

correspondence suggests that in 1875 and for at least a couple of decades to come, letter writing was mainly confined to those with money to make and money to spend.(Vincent 1989, 49) And as for the universal brotherhood, we have merely to note that the growth in European correspondence from three to twenty-five billion items a year between 1875 and 1913 did nothing to prevent the continent tearing itself apart thereafter. Only Switzerland, now established as the bureaucratic center of the world, escaped the coming conflict.

2)   The Iconoclasts

The emergence of literacy as a discrete category of study in the sixties and seventies was fuelled by two perceptions: first, that this was a form of historical behavior which could be subjected to wide-scale, long-run quantification; second, that the move from an oral to a print culture had a transformative effect on individuals and societies. It was not long, however, before these convictions came into conflict. As the counting work became more sophisticated, the conversion claims appeared increasingly crude.

Harvey Graff's *Literacy Myth* of 1979 constituted a particularly effective demolition charge. His study, which was based on the 1861 Canadian census, attacked the generalized claims for literacy, especially in respect of the children who were beginning to spend increasing years locked up inside the classroom. The effect of their lessons had to be discovered in their later encounters with the patterns of class, ethnicity, and gender which would dominate their lives. Possession of the skills of reading and writing had no meaning outside the contexts in which they could be used. There was no necessary benefit from gaining a command of the written word, and a close examination of the economy of mid-nineteenth century Hamilton, Ontario suggested that there was no necessary loss in remaining illiterate. Literacy did not dissolve structural inequalities. Whilst some men and fewer women might be launched into lives of intellectual discovery and occupational advance, "on the basic level of social and economic progress and those who determined it," as he wrote, "literacy

was more valuable to the society's goals and needs than to those of most individuals within it."(Graff 1979, 33)

At the center of this critique, and that of other studies which followed it, was the assumed dichotomy between the spoken and the written. The notion of a discrete oral tradition became increasingly untenable, particularly as the qualitative techniques for studying literacy became more sophisticated. The concept of a folk culture defined by the absence of print was undermined, so also was that of a popular culture constituted by the absence of control over the means of production.(Davis 1977, 9-12; Rose 1992, 58, Gildea 1976, 228) One by one the historiographical foundation stones were demolished. Roger Chartier stressed that there could be no necessary relationship between the printed word and the basic social or economic structures in which the literate lived and worked. (Chartier 1994, 7-16) The boundaries of cultural practice could not be determined by class or occupational status. It was argued that the notion of a distinct mass culture constituted by the capitalist production of consumer goods obscured more than it illuminated.(Waites et al 1982, 15) The emphasis in the analysis of cultural practice moved from structure to flow. In the world from which the elementary schools took their pupils, poverty was never a passive condition. The less the command of material goods, the greater the impetus to borrow, share and invent.(Hall 1984, 5-14; Anderson 1991, 7) All forms of consumption depended on improvisation. Where outright ownership was difficult other devices would be found to meet expanding demand. Possession became easier as innovations in production, distribution and marketing brought down the cost of print, but always appetite outran the capacity to satisfy it. The traditional categories of print were everywhere subverted by the undisciplined energy of the newly literate. As with their stomachs, so with their minds poor readers were, to use de Certeau's term, life-long poachers.(de Certeau 1988) It remains necessary to count. Tables of signatures and postal flows, of print runs and prices, need to be calculated, but such activity supplies only the starting point for an analysis of what was read and written, by whom and with what effect. "Like writing," observed Daniel Roche, "reading is an act of

mediation susceptible to infinite modulations, and nothing in notarial records tells us how to distinguish between fluent reading which presupposes the regular handling of books, the irregular, infrequent deciphering of print often linked with pictures, or reading aloud, shared among several people, which may have been an act of friendship, even love, or sociability."(Roche 1987, 215) The indeterminate nature of the use of literacy was captured by the notion of appropriation which referred both to the annexation of objects and practices and also to the derivation of meanings from the printed word. (Chartier 1984, 2-35).

3)   Life amidst the ruins

So as we stand amidst the rubble of shattered images, what is the agenda for the third generation of literacy scholars? One answer is, in a sense, to return literacy to its original home. Before they emerged as discrete topics of study in the sixties, reading and writing were seen as dependent factors in a range of cultural and material histories. Having undertaken the necessary task of theoretical, conceptual and technical clarification, we can re-insert literacy into a diverse body of contextual histories deploying a wide variety of methodologies drawn from right across the humanities and social sciences.(Graff 1995, 306) In my own recent work it has been an integral element in research into social mobility, the classroom, and privacy and secrecy, and the list can be extended almost without limit.

There are, however, a number of reasons for retaining literacy as an historical problem in its own right. The first of these has more to do with the present than the past. Much of the energy of Graff's *Literacy Myth* was derived from an engagement with the educational policies of the late 1970s. The book argued, with every justification, that the expectations invested in the contemporary school system required critical interrogation by historians as much as by other social scientists. And it has to be said that however great the impact of his work and that of other scholars of the 1980s and 1990s on the discipline of history, its effect on politicians and administrators appears negligible. The

modern world keeps returning to literacy, reinventing the myths and embodying them in yet more powerful institutional forms, which are having profound effects on new generations of children, parents, and teachers. In Britain, the current government has introduced a new 'National Literacy Strategy' which has led to the imposition of the so-called "Literacy Hour" in primary schools, a compulsory daily lesson, foregrounding basic skills and traditional methods at the expense of most of the rest of the curriculum in a move strongly reminiscent of the Revised Code of 1861. If history is to perform one of its key functions of interrogating the presentness of the present, then it is simply not permitted to abandon the critical study of literacy. An earlier onslaught by the governments of the early nineties devastated the history of education as a sub-discipline, erasing the subject from teacher training programs and closing down posts across the university system. The new cohorts of schoolteachers know less about the past of their profession than any since the early nineteenth century and their political masters care less. It has never been more necessary or more urgent to address the basic issue of what has happened in the classroom as children have been exposed to the rudiments of reading and writing.[4]

A second reason for retaining the topic is the sheer wealth of the material which has now been located and refined. We must of course retain a sharply critical stance towards trans-national generalizations, towards the technical limitations of the quantitative data which inform them and towards the monochromatic modernization theories which so often drive them. But in the imperfect world which historians inhabit, where consistent data time-series rarely exist within, let alone across, national boundaries, we are in danger of losing sight of the untapped potential of literacy as a source for long-term comparative analysis. The point can be made by the Universal Postal Union. Correspondence fulfils the role demanded by so many scholars of constituting a measure not just of the possession but also of the use of literacy. From 1875 onwards the tireless statisticians in Berne published detailed and largely consistent tables of postal flows, up to 1930 listing the per capita correspondence of what rapidly became the great majority of the world's population. (Vincent 2000,

3-4) Categories of mail were separated, revealing, for instance, the early use by commercial firms of what we would now term junk mail. Modes of transport were specified, thus permitting a comparative analysis of the changing deployment of roads, trains, and water. And for the truly obsessive, it was possible to count the number of post-boxes per head of population from Austria to Vietnam. In the pursuit of comparative history, particularly as regards the interpenetration of the economic, political and cultural spheres, the study of literacy retains a privileged position, and one, which it should not readily vacate.

A third reason for retaining literacy as a broad, inter-disciplinary topic of study in its own right stems from the consequences of the linguistic turn, which at one level has served to complete the iconoclastic work set in motion by the quantifiers. This has stressed that what the newly literate thought they were doing as they took up a book or a pen was not determined by the purposes designated by authors and educators. The iterations between the inscribed and prescribed significance of using literacy can only be recaptured by a patient historical identification of contexts and responses. This approach has been one of the means by which literacy has been reconstituted as an integral element of other sub-disciplines, including the rapidly expanding "history of the book."

However, as the old dichotomies are reduced to ideological constructions, there remain problems of scope and causation. The diminishing emphasis on the determining role of class and other structures of inequality has reflected a growing preoccupation with certain aspects of the uses of literacy. The most striking recent work has focused on texts and how they were consumed. It has been alert to the ways in which material pressures shaped and constrained the formation of meanings and practices. There has been less concern with the reverse process, the ways in which ideologies of literacy may have influenced the development of basic structures of authority. "Too often", observed Bob Scribner, "the material conditions and the relationships that constitute the basis of human subsistence, have been ignored, possibly because they appear too mundane or perhaps for fear of falling into a reductive materialism."(Scribner 1989, 181) There are dangers not just in the

implicit economic determinism of earlier treatments of popular culture but also in the conviction of many Victorian educators that the world of books could constitute a protected sphere in which rich and poor could meet as equals.[5] The effort has to be made to understand the full range of interactions between literacy and the structural inequalities of Victorian capitalism, and in particular to clarify whether the relative autonomy of the meanings of literacy varied over time. The dissemination of mass literacy cannot be separated from the way in which ideological constructions of mass communication were entrenched in systems for reproducing the labor force. As Richard Biernacki has argued of this era, "culture exercised an influence *of its own* but not completely *by itself.* The power of culture arose from its inscription in material practice."(Biernacki 1997, 34-5)

The tendency for literacy to be reabsorbed into distinct disciplinary contexts needs to be countered by a continuing engagement with the breadth of issues implicated in the process of learning and using the skills of reading and writing. If we take the post as an example, we are faced with the most intense and protean form of communication, whose multiple possibilities for using and misusing written language have yet fully to be charted. The postcard for instance, which was the first truly popular form of correspondence, is only beginning to receive serious treatment.[6] We also have a complex transport history, an economic history of costs and of the internationalization of market transactions which fuelled much of the early expansion; we have a political history of the growth of national and international bureaucracy and regulation; we have a history of time as it became available to some sections of society and later to others; we have a history of privacy as the sealing and opening the envelope became a prized extension of personal autonomy; and we have a history of secrecy as governments sought to interfere in the free flow of the mails. All of these matters can be studied separately, but the challenge remains of fitting these histories together. The task is one of resisting the reductionism of engaging exclusively either with the material inequalities that shaped and were in turn reinforced by the use of the pen, or with the unpredictable outpourings of fact and imagination carried by the postman.

Historians of literacy must treat with equal respect the forces of anarchism and inertia inherent in the spread of written communication. Always there are children and parents subverting the intentions of the official curriculum, always there are readers taking ungovernable meanings from texts. Yet, as Harvey Graff argued twenty years ago, and the better studies have since confirmed, what so often emerges from analysis of mass literacy is the inability of the newly educated readers and writers to use their skills to penetrate or dissolve the structures of material and social privilege. The only generalization to survive unscathed the era of iconoclasm has been a negative one, the widespread sense of waste and loss as generations of schoolchildren were equipped with tools of written communication too blunt to make an impression on the structures of inequality into which they were born.

Bibliography

Anderson 1991. Anderson, P., <u>The Printed Image and the Transformation of Popular Culture 1790-1860</u> (Oxford).

Biernacki 1997. Biernacki, R., <u>The Fabrication of Labour. Germany and Britain, 1640-1914</u> (Berkeley).

Chartier, 1984. Chartier, R., 'Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France', in Kaplan, S. L. (ed.), <u>Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century</u> (Berlin).

Chartier 1994. Chartier, R., <u>The Order of Books</u> (Cambridge).

Davis 1977. Davies, N. Z., 'The Historian and Popular Culture', in, Beauroy, J., Bertrand, M., and Gargan, E. T. (eds.) <u>The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century</u> (Saratoga, Calif.).

Hall 1984. Hall, D., 'Introduction', in Kaplan, S. L. (ed.), <u>Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century</u> (Berlin).

Gildea 1976. Gildea, R. 'Education in Nineteenth-Century Brittany: Ille-et-   Vilaine, 1800-1914', <u>Oxford Review of Education</u>, 2, 3.

Graff 1979. Graff, H. J., <u>The Literacy Myth</u> (London).

Graff 1995. Graff, H. J., <u>The Labyrinths of Literacy. Reflections on Literacy Past and Present</u> (rev. ed., Pittsburgh).

Roche 1987. Roche, D., <u>The People of Paris</u> (Leamington Spa).

Rose, 1992. Rose, J., 'Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences', <u>Journal of the History of Ideas</u>, 53.

Scribner 1989. Scribner, R. W., 'Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?',   <u>History of European Ideas</u> 10, 2.

Vincent 1989, Vincent, D., <u>Literacy and Popular Culture. England 1750-1914</u> (Cambridge).

Vincent 2000. Vincent, D., <u>The Rise of Mass Literacy. Reading and Writing in Modern Europe</u> (Cambridge).

Waites et al 1982. Waites, B., Bennett, T. and Martin, G. (eds), <u>Popular Culture: Past and Present</u> (London).

11

Notes

1.   The organisation was termed the General Postal Union at its foundation, but was renamed the Universal Postal Union at a second congress in Paris in 1878, and has retained this name to the present day (the official title was usually rendered in French - L'Union Générale des Postes, L'Union Postale Universelle).

2.   Standard accounts of the organisation are given in, G. A. Codding, The Universal Postal Union (New York, 1964); M. A. K. Menon, The Universal Postal Union (March, 1965). On its foundation, see, POST 29/519, 326R/1891, A Brief Account of the Formation of the Universal Postal Union, Its Gradual Extension to the Various parts of the British Empire and the Reasons which have hitherto Deterred the Australasian and South African Colonies from Joining the Union (London, 1886), pp. 3-5; 'The History and Constitution of the Postal Union', Times, Aug. 15, 1891; F. E. Baines, Forty Years at the Post Office (London, 1895), vol. 2, pp. 159-60; E. Bennett, the Post Office and its Story (London, 1912), pp. 223-7; H. Robinson, Britain's Post Office (Oxford, 1953), pp. 190-1; M. J. Daunton, Royal Mail (London, 1985), pp. 159-60.

3.   The Times, August 15, 1891. On the contemporary association of the UPU with civilisation see, Menon, The Universal Postal Union, p. 3.

4.   For a pioneering approach to this issue, see, I. Grosvenor, M. Lawn and K. Rousmaniere (eds.), Silences and Images: the Social History of the Classroom (New York, 1998).

5.   See, for instance, G. L. Craik, The Pursuit of Knowledge Under Difficulties (London, 1830-31), vol. 1, p. 418.

6.   See T. Philips, The Postcard Century (Thames and Hudson, London, 2000).