Academic Literacies, Legitimacy Crises, and Electronic Cultures

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Literacy and Legitimacy in the Academy

Elsewhere, I have argued that at least within the academy, what critics and politicians call a crisis in literacy is less a crisis of skills and abilities, as they would have us believe, and more a crisis of meaning. As a crisis in meaning, the conditions that have been called a crisis in literacy reflect both the illegitimacy of the cultural capital, or a symbolic power, of intellectual work in the U.S. academy, and perpetuate the violences that J. Elspeth Stuckey has decried. Part of the source of this illegitimacy can be found in the ways that academic institutions have become what Bill Readings has called "bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporations" (11). Within a larger context, these conditions are symptomatic of a mercantilization of meaning that many, from bell hooks to Jean-François Lyotard have identified, conditions that have led to concerns over the future of education in the United States.

The argument that I make resides upon the claim that literacy instruction in US colleges and universities presupposes cultural values that lack a fundamental credibility in a postmodern society. Over time, literacy instruction generally, and in the United States specifically, has authorized versions of literacy that have been increasingly separated from the cultural and social contexts that make these literacies meaningful (Nespor; Russell 22-26). At least in US colleges and universities, the primary site of acculturation into these decontextualized literacies and cultures has been the English department. Initially at Harvard in the mid-nineteenth century and then quickly spreading to other institutions, English classes-both literature and composition classes-served to provide cultural standards for the academy and a means for assessing their acquisition (Douglas; Miller 51-53). Over time, the overt presence of the literature classroom, as the source of these values, has diminished, and the composition classroom has assimilated the entire responsibility of certifying students in the literacies and cultures of the academy, a perspective that is shared not only by administrators and faculty in other disciplines but also by many composition specialists themselves (Schilb 59).

The problem, as I have framed it, is that the decontextualized literacies of the academy mask the cultural values that these literacies authorize. An analysis of the discourse from the best-selling textbooks in literature and composition from the late 1990s suggests that, as Lester Faigley and others have pointed out, academic literacies are largely essayist literacies, which are comprised of elaborate syntactical and sequential relations, significant amounts of new information, and truth values as opposed to rhetorical conditions (Scollon and Scollon 41 ff). Perhaps less obvious, these practices authorize essentialized subject positions of Western rational minds talking to other Western rational minds and foundational versions of the world in which a completely accessible reality is entirely expressible in texts. As a result, being literate, at least in an academic sense, amounts to not only being able to engage in elaborated discursive practices but also to do so in such a way as to construct an appropriate version of the self and to demonstrate an allegiance to a positivistic and foundational world. For example, being able to produce a conventional academic argument means not only generating claims, grounds, and warrants but also selecting appropriate grounds and acceptable warrants, appropriate and acceptable, that is, as defined by academic communities. Ultimately, these practices, as well as the concomitant subject positions and values, constitute the cultural capital of the academy.

Literacy Crises and Heterogeneous Communities

Given the results of this discourse analysis, it is fairly easy to see how I arrive at my claim that the conditions that critics have called the contemporary crisis in literacy are less a crisis of skills and abilities and more a crisis of meaning and legitimacy. However, such conditions-what others call literacy crisis and what I call a legitimacy crisis-are not necessarily new problems of a postmodern society. As is well documented, the United States has something of a tradition of literacy crises-1870s, 1910s, 1940s, 1970s, and, most recently, the late 1990s. What is interesting to me is that historically, literacy crises have been linked to dramatic increases in enrollment (Russell 35; Hourigan 3 ff; Ohmann). For example, the overall enrollment between 1870 and 1890 increased three times and

doubled again by 1910, and despite a greater homogeneity in academic communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, critics were nonetheless inspired to lament the (relative) decline in literacy. (Not insignificantly, the English department, as an institutional site, coincides roughly with the purported literacy crisis of the 1870s.) An alternative reading of this correlation is that each time the institutionalized culture of the academy was challenged by the infusion of different form of cultural capital newly injected within the institution, critics would anxiously declare a crisis in literacy instead of questioning what these conditions suggested about institutionalized literacies and cultures.

Not surprisingly, US colleges and universities are in the middle of another dramatic increase in enrollment. Of postsecondary institutions in the United States, the combined undergraduate population will increase by nineteen percent over the next decade or so from 13.4 million students in 1995 to 16 million students by 2015. More to my argument about legitimacy, of the additional 2.6 million students, more than two million of them will be minorities-African-American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, etc.-thereby increasing the total number of minority students from 29.4 percent in 1995 to 37.2 percent by 2015 (Educational). Obviously, the legitimacy of conventional academic literacies is a question for these students, as Helen Fox has demonstrated. More specifically, these literacies and cultures represent hurdles to overcome or values to resist, depending upon whether these students see themselves, using John Ogbu's terms, as immigrant (i.e. voluntary) or involuntary minorities. However, I am arguing that this cultural capital lacks a legitimacy for intellectuals generally in a postmodern society for both minorities and mainstream alike. Though it is difficult to procure conventional evidence that directly supports this claim, I can cite what I believe to be indirect evidence, such as increasing drop out rates and declining test scores, as well as anecdotal evidence, such as Daniel Green's recent critique of English studies and English departments, and my own experiences in the academy.

More to the issues of literacy, two obvious examples from the best-selling textbooks are the modes of discourse (e.g. narration, description, a variety of expositions, and argumentation) and static abstractions (e.g. unity and coherence). Though both have fallen from theoretical favor, most of the best-selling textbooks, except for one, invoke the modes, and all of them insist upon unity and coherence. Making the situation even more complicated, much of the discourse about literacy instruction in the academy, as Cheryl Armstrong, Maureen Hourigan, and others have pointed out, comes from intellectuals in institutions that are culturally different from those in which the bulk of literacy work occurs, at least in terms of colleges and universities in the United States. As one example, Armstrong points out that despite the stereotypes of Basic Writers in the academy, basic writers at Harvard are often former AP students in English who have been preparing for prestigious colleges and universities for most of their educational careers (31-39).

From my perspective, what is often lost is the ways in which the discourse about literacy in the academy authorizes particular cultural values that covertly works to reinforce the conditions that critics have mistakenly called the contemporary crisis in literacy. If we restore this context, then the situation looks much different. If legitimacy is not defined in binary terms-either you have it or you don't-of conventional definitions of cultural literacy, then literacy events in the academy have always been about acculturation, and especially in times of increasing enrollments, educational acts have been sites of conflict between institutionalized cultures and the cultures being tracked into classrooms and offices. From this perspective, institutions and classrooms have always been contact zones, or as Mary Louise Pratt defines them, social spaces where cultures come in contact, often raising political issues (34). However, the problem, if I can continue with this metaphor, is that there are more fault lines, to use Richard Miller's image, than perhaps we have recognized, more conflicts, as Mina Shaughnessy, Tom Fox, and others have demonstrated, than we acknowledge. If we are to do more than declare another literacy crisis, then we must produce alternatives to the violence of appropriating or being appropriated by the dominant literacies and cultures of the academy. The alternative I have offered is what I have come to call constructed literacies, which see both literate performance and legitimacy as a dialogue between and among competing literacies and cultures. Functioning not unlike Michel de Certeau's strategies and tactics, the practices constructed literacies can both disrupt traditional literacies and cultures of the academy and can authorize legitimate alternatives.

Which is why I'm so interested in computers, as I suspect that the literacy practices of computers, in light of their crossover credibility, can authorize legitimate constructed literacies.

Academic Literacies and Electronic Cultures

Inside the academy, computers have an increasing legitimacy, as recent essay collections, including *Literacy and Computers* and *Electronic Communication Across the Curriculum* attest (Selfe and Hilligoss; Reiss, Selfe, and Young). And the increasing legitimacy of computers outside of the academy is even greater. To cite one example, researchers admit in a recent article in *Nature* that they have had to revise their original estimate of publicly indexable web pages, or those that are most often considered by search engines, from at least 320 million to 800 million (107). Not surprisingly, theorists have already begun to reread academic institutions and disciplines in light of computers and literacies. Some have argued that with the necessary resources, computers in the academy can transform often fragmented institutions cultures by producing what Mike Palmquist, Kate Kiefer, and Donald Zimmerman call "a strong sense of community," which they claim, is their "most gratifying outcome" of their efforts at Colorado State (68-69). Within my own disciplinary space of the English department, electronic literacies have enabled Craig Stroupe to revision English studies as the site that both responds to the discourses of the WWW and, at the same time, maintains a critical perspective on both conventional and electronic codes. More specifically, he argues that these "distinctive literacies" that emerge from the confluence of conventional and electronic discursive practices are characterized by what he describes as "dialogically constitutive relations between words and images-in a larger sense, between the literacies of verbal and visual cultures-which can function as a singly intended, if double-voiced rhetoric" (608, 609).

Crises and Computers

Beyond rereading and rewriting institutions and disciplines, electronic discursive practices can disrupt the conditions that critics have mistakenly called the contemporary crisis in literacy. As many know this research better than I, what I propose to do is merely to resituate it in relation to my argument about literacies, legitimacy, and intellectual work. Based upon a desultory reading, I see two kinds of contributions that computers can make to the agenda of constructed literacies-doing literacy differently and different ways of doing literacy. As for the first, electronic discursive practices offer ways of doing literacy differently by facilitating a critique of conventional practices and versions of who to be and how to see the world. For example, electronic practices can generate a critique of what Craig Stroupe, whom I cited earlier, calls *elaborationism*, or "a set of cultural, pedagogical, and technical practices based on the idea that the formal composing or reading process can produce more critical forms of consciousness" (609). Moreover, these practices tend to supplement conventionally solitary acts of discursive production and consumption by facilitating collaboration in the act of intellectual work between and among faculty, students, disciplines, and institutions. At the same time, electronic discursive practices offer different ways of doing literacy by providing alternative versions of who to be and how to see the world. To cite two examples, some have argued that e-mail offers spaces in which emergent intellectuals can appropriate various discursive practices as a means of escaping the confines of teachers and disciplines, and others have argued that hypertext, as an extension of print, challenges conventional roles of writers and readers, decenters the subject in discourse, provides sites for often suppressed cultural values, authorizes constructivism, and generates embodied and local epistemologies.

In these and other ways, electronic discursive practices encourage dialogic literacies, which, according to Irene Ward, mediate the individual and the social in the process of intellectual becoming, and forms of intellectual work that, consistent with those advocated by Bill Readings, can escape the ruins of the contemporary university (Ward 169 ff; Readings 180 ff). Again, my argument is that the legitimacy of electronic discursive practices, both inside and outside of the academy, can facilitate the process of constructing literacies that are mutually legitimate to the academy and the postmodern world beyond it, and if the predictions for the future are anywhere accurate, the symbiotic relationship between literacies and technologies promises to be even more productive.

Causes for Concern

Let me qualify my claim by pointing out the obvious. As literacies, themselves, are not inherently liberatory or dominating, the mere presence of computers does not guarantee a constructed literacy or any other alternative to the conditions that critics have called the contemporary crisis in literacy. In fact, electronic literacy practices pose their own problems. While these practices can disrupt conventional power relations in classrooms and provide alternative forms of knowledge and meaning, they can also highlight ethnicity and economics in predictable, and not so predictable, ways. For example, the discursive practices of computers inscribe their own cultural biases by privileging capitalism, social class, standard English, rationalism, and logocentrism (Selfe and Selfe). In terms of

practices and texts, e-mail can serve to maintain conventional classroom hierarchies, and hypertext can privilege particular intellectuals and inhibit resistance. Beyond the technologies themselves, there are other social issues at stake. For instance, minority and working-class students, as many have argued, have less access to computers, and thereby fewer opportunities to master these discursive practices.

Less expectedly, the experiences I have had in classrooms in which I have experimented with electronic discursive practices as ways of disrupting conventional literacies and constructing new ones have left me wondering whether, despite of their potential, electronic literacies, at least in this moment in their social evolution, challenge students' educational histories in ways that I have been unable to overcome, at least in a single semester. However, I have come to conclude, after informal investigation, that this situation is less a problem of electronic literacies and more a problem of the very conditions that have given rise to the crises in literacy, meaning, and education in the United States. If education were less about socialization into a monolithic, universalized cultural capital and more about experiencing differences and experimenting with discourses, meanings, and worlds, then the challenges of electronic literacies, I believe, would not paralyze but energize. Such a perspective is borne out when I examine the complaints from students in my classrooms. Upon closer scrutiny, the conflict is often between what they've been told to see as legitimate intellectual work, such as the lecture or the essay exam, and what I am asking them to see as legitimate intellectual work, such as the discussion board or threaded e-mails. If, and when, I can problematize their educational histories, which often amounts to challenging a "no-pain-no-gain" educational philosophy, then electronic reading and writing both the word and the world becomes more like the engaging and exciting encounters that bell hooks and others have argued that education should have been be all along (7).

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