Literacies: One Individual's Journey

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How one becomes literate is the subject of much study. Literacy was once measured by one's ability to read and write. Today, however, many scholars contend that this narrow view no longer works. Most concur that literacy is inextricably linked with one's relationship to society and is best defined in broader terms. James Gee in "What is Literacy?" defines literacy as one's ability to master certain discourses. One "acquires a discourse by enculturation (apprenticeship) into social practices through supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse" (527). In other words, one becomes literate not through his or her ability to read and write, but through ways of being in the world-social identities, learning how to act and talk and speak and think according to certain discourses within society. Gee defines these "secondary Discourses" as stores, churches, schools, community groups, state and national businesses, agencies and organizations" (527). Obviously, then, one can be literate in more than one Discourse. In this case study I describe one individual's journey toward technological literacy to test Gee's theory of literacy (secondary Discourse) as applied to technology.

The ethnographers in *Life at the Margins* observed and talked to people in their everyday settings to "uncover the meaning people make of their everyday literacy experiences" (13). In the same way, I studied Dr. Brook's everyday literacy experiences relying on field observations of technological literacy (participant observations of writing and reading activities in natural settings); (2) tape-recorded personal statements (ethnographic interviews); and (3) archival data collection (Szwed 429).

When I asked the Director of the Writing Program at a large state university, if he was interested in being profiled as part of a series of case studies, he responded to my e-mail by saying, "Yes, since turnabout is fair play. I have just assigned literary profiles to both of my composition classes this semester." During our first interview, I discovered that Dr. Brooks has always been interested in technology, if we can assume that technology made possible the printed page.

According to Gee's theory of literacy, there are primary and secondary Discourses. A primary discourse cannot be acquired by "overt instruction, but by being a member of a primary socializing group (family, clan, peer group)" (527). The primary Discourse is:

The one we first use to make sense of the world and interact with others . . .[It] constitutes our original and home-based sense of identity . . . [And] aspects and pieces of the primary Discourse become a "carrier" or "foundation" for Discourses acquired later in life. (527)

Gee's theory of primary Discourse is certainly true for Dr. Brooks, who has a Ph.D. in English Literature. Dr. Brooks grew up in an environment where literature was valued. Books were given as presents. He has one particular memory as a child that has to do with a set of juvenile literature books that were bound back-to-back. They were companion books in bright colors. Every month a new book would be mailed, but for some unknown reason one day his parents received the whole set of books. Dr. Brooks remembers going to the attic and pouring over the box of books he couldn't have yet. To this day, he buys as many books as possible. Dr. Brooks' primary Discourse became a "carrier" of other Discourses he acquired in life.

Secondary Discourses, according to Gee, are interactions with the public sphere-schools, churches, community groups, state and national businesses, agencies and organizations. For someone to become literate in these public spheres, he or she must take on a particular role that one will recognize. Dr. Brooks remembers the 11th grade when his teacher nominated him for the National Council of Teachers of English award. This was the first time that someone had told him that he was really, really, good at writing in ways he had not been aware of before. This particular moment had an influence on the direction his career would take. According to Gee's theory of literacy, one "acquires a secondary Discourse by enculturation into social practice through supported interaction with people who have already mastered the discourse" (527). Dr. Brooks' 11th.grade teacher recognized his ability to write, recognized that Michael had acquired a specific skill that would eventually bring solidarity within a certain social network.

Gee emphasizes that a person must have "access to the social practice or they don't get into the Discourse" (527). Dr. Brooks' enculturation into English education began in high school and continued through college and graduate school. He demonstrated to those within the Discourse his "right" to participate. This is evident by the fact that he holds a PhD. in 20th century Literature and a minor in Language and Composition, as well as being the Director of a Writing program. But the real focus of this study has to do with Dr. Brooks' technological literacy because it relates directly to his success in academe. Although he was directly influenced by his primary, socializing group, his family and its love of books, and although his acceptance into English studies was initially based on his ability to write, without being literate in technology, he would not be in the position he is today. Technology, specifically the computer, played and continues to play an integral part in his participation and acceptance into the secondary Discourses of academe.

Gee's theory involves apprenticeship:

Within a Discourse you are always teaching . . . when I say 'teach' here, I mean apprentice someone in a master-apprentice relationship in a social practice (Discourse) where you scaffold their growing ability to say, do, value, believe and so forth, within that Discourse, through demonstrating your mastery and supporting theirs even when it barely exists (i.e., you make it look as if they can do what they really can't do). (530)

Dr. Brooks was apprenticed in computer technology, and I have noticed through the process of four interviews that his own intellectual curiosity and motivation lead him to his teachers. Dr. Brooks was first introduced to the computer at Louisiana State University (LSU), where he earned a BA in English in 1979. One faculty member, a medievalist, was beginning to use the mainframe computers to do word lists, but this is all he recalls about computers at that time. They were big and slow with great potential. From LSU, he went to the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill (UNC) where he began teaching English composition in 1981. It wasn't until1984, however, that he first began using computers in the English program at UNC. Dr. Brooks remembers how carefully he and other faculty spoke as they began to introduce the computer to students. They would point out to students, "You will be using c- o - m - p - u - t - e - r - s in this course-- c - o - m- p- u- t- e- r- s." In other words, Dr. Brooks and his colleagues were overly emphatic because most people were apprehensive and afraid of this new technology. Dr. Brooks explains that in 1984 computers were scary things. This experience parallels Dennis Baron's current scholarship:

Each new literacy technology begins with a restricted communication function and is available only to a small number of initiates. Because of the high cost of the technology and general ignorance about it, practitioners keep it to themselves at first--either on purpose or because nobody has any use for it--and then, gradually, they begin to mediate the new technology for the general public. (16)

During this period at UNC, Dr. Brooks was also working on his dissertation. He had had some experience with computers---the huge, elaborate main-frame type, in which he would send things in and a half hour later get a paragraph back---but never with a personal computer (PC). This new technology revolutionized his life. He remembers feverishly typing away on a little typewriter---60 pages of thesis---over and over again until the word processor miraculously began to manage his dissertation. He recalls how he learned Microsoft backward and forward, inside and out. He memorized every command and eventually had style sheets for every inch of his dissertation. He had an intimate relationship with the computer. The computer enabled him to change his world---to write a dissertation with more efficiency and less work. What is interesting, however, is that Dr. Brooks immediately points out that he knows very little about that aspect of the computer today, a situation that still puzzles him: "We, as human beings, have the ability to learn the things we need to learn, but I wonder how valuable the information is if we have to learn it again." The subject itself is interesting to him---the intimacy with which you learn something for the first time and its impact on learning it again. He recalls the first time he owned an answering machine. He was fascinated with the new technology. He spent his time learning all the codes---how to record messages and to access messages---so he could access information when he was away from home. Since then he has owned four or five different machines, but the motivation to learn the new technology has dissipated. He says, " I couldn't call home and get my messages today if my life depended on it." He notes in himself a resistance to learn the same things over.

Dr. Brooks moved from UNC to the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) to teach composition. He had some use of computers (Macintosh) in the classroom, but, as he says, "the resources were scant and you had to make

a case to be in there." It was at this time in his life that he decided to buy his first computer, certainly a "moment" of literacy for him. He chose a Macintosh. He remembers that one of the features of the Macintosh that he particularly liked was the ability to customize it. He chose the background colors and the fonts. It was like a toy. He was doing some writing at that time, but he was also interested in desktop publishing. He remembers in 1992 living in Los Angeles and not being able to get home for Christmas. He used the computer and available software to create a booklet of special family memories to send home to his family in his absence. He remembers being quite "taken up" with the idea of printing. At that time he was living in a tiny "Hollywood" apartment in Los Angeles. It was decorated with a medieval motif---little castles and turrets all around the apartment. He decided that the inscription on the back of his booklet would read, "Great Castle Press."

It was at UCLA that he became very much interested in computers and writing. There were people at UCLA who were at the forefront of technology and writing. He met with Richard Lanham, who encouraged him professionally several times. In 1993, at the end of his time at UCLA, Dr. Brooks went to a conference about Internet access and Internet resources. He remembers a feeling of void within, unsure of the new terminology being discussed. There were several new systems available at that time---Gopher, wire systems, etc. and the World Wide Web (WWW). This new technology sparked his interest. He remembers wondering, "How can computers change our relationship to writing? To text?" Since his arrival at the State University 1994, Dr. Brooks has spent the last several years answering these questions. He is much more involved with the web, in teaching courses over the web, and in developing web sites.

In addition to his work as Director of the Writing Program, Dr. Brooks is currently teaching three classes, two of which are online courses. I asked him why computers are important to composition studies:

Initially we, as a field, were making these elaborate claims that computers allowed you to do this better or that better . . . they revised better or more . . . etc. But we can't seem to prove this. I guess what I can say now is simply that the reading and writing that our students will do on campus and in their professional lives will be within computer environments. This is where they will be writing and this is where we need to teach them.

The course description for his two online courses reads: "The particular focus of this class is the impact of technology on literacy, a particularly apt topic for an online composition course. We'll begin the term by surveying some of the issues that involve the intersection of technology and literacy." The text Dr. Brooks has chosen for these classes is *Literacy, Technology and Society: Confronting the Issues* edited by Hawisher and Selfe (New York, Prentice Hall: 1997). When I asked Dr. Brooks if he thought that computers were effective tools for teaching and learning, he replied:

I think so. I think in a couple ways. One is just simply the fact that a lot of the reading and writing our students do is on computers. Just as we don't use slates and chalk anymore and have always gone the way of technology, computers are where it will happen. Also, computer technology, depending on how it is structured, can let students act in a writing class not just as readers but also as writers who are read. In online writing classes students are writing to each other and not to [the teacher] . . . about authors. When students get their words taken seriously by their colleagues, by other students, they begin to see writing from a public view--writing as communication. Students are more responsible for their words and in a different way than in a classroom space. Everyone has the time and space to express his or herself, but their words are their only vehicle. Students cannot dismiss each other's words as easily as they can face to face in a traditional classroom. It's easier to stereotype people by their physical appearances than it is with their words. Students must listen carefully and pay attention to words as tools of identification. Dismissing someone as a "dumb jock" isn't quite as easy in the virtual world.

Dr. Brooks' current scholarship investigates computer technology as well as the online experience of the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender community (LGBT). In a recently published article, Dr Brooks examines the use of technology, specifically the Web, as it relates to LGBT students. As a writing teacher, he is particularly interested in how people use writing in a meaningful way. He conducted a Web-based survey, which gathered seventy-five responses from web users, who supplied information about their online experiences as LGBT people. They all reported using online resources to serve, "Many functions in the coming out process: They gather information, try out new ways of self-expression, and find an audience of like-minded people with whom they interact." These people are using literacy in terms of Dr. Brooks' definition--communicating to change their worlds.

Since computer technology is in its infancy and there are no models to follow, I asked Dr. Brooks to define "computer literacy." He responded by saying, "I think we need to think carefully about what that means." He gave an example of why educators need to be thoughtful about computer technology. Several years ago he sat in on a colleague's seminar on the Bible. One of the features of the course was that students were sent out every week to find reviews of whatever book they were discussing. One of the books was *God, The Biography*, which had won the Pulitzer Prize for biography a few years prior. Dr. Brooks explained that, "Two students, two of the best, brightest, and sharpest honor students, went out to find reviews and came back to say there were no reviews for this book." They had done a Web search. Dr. Brooks was bothered for two reasons: (1)"We have to give them a search strategy that works, and (2) They were so relying on the computer that the common sense that this book won a Pulitzer Prize and that literature must be out there, didn't apply. To conclude that there were no reviews out there seems to get at an issue of literacy. They were betrayed by their trust in the machine."

On his desk in his office at the University, where our interviews took place, sits an old, in fact, dead Macintosh computer. Why this *objet d'art* rests there, I never asked. As I contemplated this scene, it was difficult not to notice its contrast with the bright new computer proudly displayed behind the desk. Although insignificant and useless, the old Macintosh became for me a gentle reminder of how time waits for no one. Letters turn to words and words to ink and ink to press and press to screen, from generation to generation. People, human beings, determine the outcome of their world.

This case study has shown me that computer literacy is essential in the 21st century. Every new challenge ultimately provided Dr. Brooks with a greater opportunity for literacy---a greater knowledge of how to function and communicate in his world. From his first introduction to computers until today, technology has empowered him and added to his success both professionally and personally. He has used the computer as "worker, messenger, processor, and knowledge broker" (Murray). He has used it in a positive way toward good, not evil (Feenberg). Technology has "improved" his life (Selfe). I can best sum up my evaluation with Dr. Brook's own definition of literacy: "People can use whatever communication tools they have--from pen and paper to computers, to web site reading and design--to both share, give and receive information in a way that is sufficient enough that they can change their lives and their world." It is a question of power.

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