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Critical Perspectives from American and Swedish Graduate Students

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Disrupted Assumptions:

Social and Historical Constructions of Literacy, Illiteracy, and E-literacy

This paper is meant to disrupt presumptive truths of the present by unsettling controlling factors of the past which have been understood as essential to the unfolding of history. As an example, various forms of "technology" have been seen as fundamental to history's "development." However, this paper seeks to disrupt understandings of history which chronologically narrate time as a natural progression through technological developments. In addition, the actions and movements of particular people in particular historical moments have also been seen as the bases for historical change. Yet, this paper disrupts the notion of history as a succession of events enacted by human beings who are independent agents outside of time and temporal rationalities. More specifically, this paper is meant to disrupt present notions of literacy, illiteracy, and electronic literacy (e-literacy) through a history that tells of the assumptions that have separated and elevated writing and print from other forms of communication.

In many ways, the realm of conceivability for disrupting assumptions of the present comes from a particular reading of the past. Foucault's genealogy is a method of reading history which problematizes the assumptions and generalities that appear as natural or self-evident in the discourses of the day. While this paper does not attempt to write a genealogy of "literacy," it does take as its starting point the facets of a genealogical history which are disruptive to assumptions of the present. Genealogy, as a history of the present, has very real implications when the grounds upon which present-day assumptions are built can be investigated and appraised for their inclusionary and exclusionary prescriptions, their real and imagined promises, their limited and limiting prospects.

Through historical examples, this paper problematizes some present assumptions about "literacy." These assumptions are grouped together
in three parts as a way to discuss and disrupt conventional perceptions regarding 1) the necessity and power of literacy, 2) the technological development of literacy, and 3) the definitions and roles of text, author, and reader in literacy education. After these assumptions are disrupted, it becomes clear that the ways we are able to think and react, teach and learn, are completely interwoven in cultures and in times. With this knowledge, disrupted assumptions can potentially open up spaces for alternate possibilities.

Assumption Number One: 
Literacy as Necessary and Powerful

Literacy is a necessary form of communication. It is necessary for science and modernity; it is necessary for democracy and emancipation. This is because the printed word is the reason we are able to organize and sustain knowledge, giving societies and individuals the power to learn and use knowledge for the purpose of improving social circumstances, individualized or otherwise. Without literacy, individuals and societies could not be influential, dominant, strong. Literacy, therefore, is a form of power.

The basic thrust of this assumption, that literacy is a necessary and powerful form of communication, is reflected especially well in any document published by or for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It informs individuals that all they have to do is become "literate," and then they have a chance at success in their worlds. Literacy is seen as necessary from a human rights perspective which demands "universal literacy" so that individuals can understand their own options in society with regard to future prospects. At the same time, literacy is also seen as necessary for the promotion of ongoing nationalism, as well as training for the purposes of technological and economic development. In the United States, this may mean defining literacy as the tool for social stability with an eye toward global competition. In other parts of the world, this progressive stance can be thought about in terms of literacy for the reconstruction or development of a country, mostly in the form of external literacy training programs which come with an underlying assumption of cultural and societal "democratization."

However, this understanding of "literacy" as necessary and powerful has its history, and the "power" associated with literacy is not an automatic given. For example, in primary oral cultures, which Ong (1982) defines as "cultures with no knowledge at all of writing" (p. 1), "literacy" has no power, since there is no knowledge whatsoever of it, or of what it can do. Instead, value and power are attached in these cultures to accustomed oral traditions, just as value and power are attached in the dominant cultures of our time to accustomed literate traditions. Cultural production and knowledge circulation can happen both with and without writing, and in fact, "literacy" can only be culturally productive when the culture places a value on the written word and its uses. It may be difficult to understand, from a literate standpoint in the present, how the "invention" of the alphabet had little to no consequence to the cultures of the time. And yet, as Whitaker (1996) points out:

It is an obvious but sometimes neglected point that, in the eighth century, when the alphabet was invented and used for the first time to write Greek, it had neither a long tradition of written literature nor any of the associations of a dominant culture attaching to it - as it almost always did when it was used in later periods of history to write other languages. To put it crudely: the first Greek who learned the alphabet had nothing to read. On the contrary, in archaic Greece the culture to which all the power and prestige belonged, was the oral one; throughout most of this period there was no tradition other than the oral to which poets could turn for inspiration and material, nor any audience other than listeners to whom they could address themselves. (p. 216)

Literacy, in other words, has not always been a necessary form of communication, and in fact, has been seen as a hindrance to truly communicative communication. Plato's Socrates, for example, criticized writing because it interfered with established habits of communication, destroying memory rather than enhancing it, and fragmenting social relationships (see Langham, 1994). Struggles against the technologies of reading and writing manifested themselves at various points in history, as tensions between "literate" ways of being and "oral" ways of being, as if the two can be separated, divided countries and groups of
people. For example, Myers (1996) explains that Medieval France "became split between Southern France (le Pays du Droit Écritois), which acknowledged the written laws of Roman law, and Northern France (le Pays du Droit Coutumier), which acknowledged oral societies and local uses" (p. 30). In addition, Myers goes on to say that similar tensions existed during the Norman invasion (1066-1307) when the "Normans wanted to eliminate the use of local, oral authentication of ownership of property in the England of the Middle Ages because those methods allowed the local, native Anglo-Saxons of England to control their own property through personal relations (oaths of witness) and other methods of local authentication" (p. 30; see also Street, 1984; Clanchy, 1979).

Even later, writing was often viewed as secondary to oral communications. For example, during the late 1200s in Europe, writing was not considered "trustworthy" when compared to face-to-face oral communications in courts and in daily business interactions. Even as late as the Reformation (1600s), in Europe and in the colonies of North America, oral connections linked people and businesses more so than "literacy" (see Myers, 1996; Street, 1984; Clanchy, 1979).

These tensions, however, did not occur because of some "natural" divide between "literacy" and "orality." In fact, how "literacy" was used and valued depended upon the already established rules of oral traditions. In other words, understandings of appropriate oral communication methods and topics were already invested with enough relevance that these practices were able to shape understandings of the "appropriate" methods and topics for reading and writing. For example, when written records slowly became more customary during the late 1700s in the United States, it was due to "an increasing amount of travel [which] helped to shift social practices from face-to-face interactions with acquaintances to interactions with strangers" (Myers, 1996, p. 32), but these written interactions were based on the preservation of oral agreements. Tensions between accepted communications techniques occur when the rules governing how one "should" communicate in one local space come in conflict with how one "should" communicate in another local space. As writing and print gained leverage in the 1700s, the tensions between various communication techniques were less apparent as print penetrated people's lives indirectly through an understand that oral sermons and speeches were written down, and through a general acceptance that writing and print were effective ways to conduct business (see Myers, 1996, p. 33, 39). In other words, the circumstances of cultures which accept "literate" techniques are such that various social needs are obviously fulfilled through writing and print, not that the technologies of writing and print enter the culture on vacant grounds. Particular acts of reading and writing, therefore, become "necessary" in particular social circumstances and discourses of what is worthwhile.

The necessity of writing and print for the development of such fields as science and history may seem monumental because in many ways written records enable a form of thought that allows for a different type of knowledge formation and organization (see, for example, MacNevin, 1993; Ong, 1982; Clanchy, 1979; Graff, 1979; Diringer, 1948). However, it is not the written records "themselves," nor literacy "itself," that enable an altered form of thinking. The fact that reading and writing lend themselves well to scientific inquiry or particular tellings of history has less to do with "literacy" than to the social and historical milieu which allows certain forms of thought to flourish over others. Since definitions of "literacy" are determined by cultural understandings of what is worthwhile, the matters that are recorded in writing, as well as the conventional understandings of how written records are to be perceived and read and used and by whom, are also determined by cultural understandings of what is worthwhile. Therefore, it is not "literacy" that is necessary for science or modernity or emancipation. Instead, social and historical circumstances enable shifts in particular versions of knowledge creation and production; social and historical conditions promote (or repress) changes in patterns and organizations of thought.

For example, a version of general understanding that enables modern science involves the distinction between the "given" world and the "inferences" or "hypotheses" that are conceived by human beings. In part, this division has its roots in the Reformation, when a different way to think about religious texts emerged (see Olson, 1991). Before the Reformation, there was no distinction between what was said in the text and what was interpreted by the reader. A text's interpreted meaning
was seen as exactly the same thing as what the text really said, as in the actual intent of God being taken from scriptural readings. Although Stock (1983) has shown that the “heretics” of the Middle Ages based their theology on a different type of interpretation, Olson (1991) also points out that:

...while heretics recognized the interpretations of the Church as interpretations - as man-made - they did not recognize their own interpretations as interpretations. They, like the medieval church, took their interpretations to be the ones intended by God, and hence, they died, apparently happily, at the stake for them. (p. 153-154)

Since “interpretation” was not viewed as the issue at hand, religious struggles were based on what God actually meant, as understood in traditional dogma, as trusted in a larger understanding of text than the given/interpreted dichotomy can allow. Even when the Scripture according to Aquinas had several layers of meaning in the late 1200s, all meanings were thought to reside in the given text (see Olson, 1991, p. 154). Convictions and beliefs that may not have been explicitly stated in the text were nevertheless seen as part of the text and its meaning. It was all intertwined. However, in the first half of the sixteenth century during the Reformation, an interpretive break was being made. Olson (1991) writes:

The interpretive principle of the Reformation, as expressed for example in Luther’s attitude to the Scripture, was that Scripture is “autonomous,” it does not need interpretation, it needs reading; it means what it says. All the rest is made up, a product of fancy or tradition. It was this distinction between the given and the interpreted that launched the Reformation and, a century later, opened “the book of nature” to modern scientists.... (p. 154)

Olson goes on to explain that the metaphor of nature as “God’s book” that was customary in the Middle Ages took on a literal meaning in the 1600s when modern scientists such as Galileo, Isaac Newton, and Francis Bacon made the distinctions between what was “given” in the text of nature (observed facts) and what was theoretically interpreted or inferred. Therefore, according to Olson, “it may be argued that modern science was the product of applying the distinctions evolved for understanding the book of Scripture, namely that between the given and the interpreted, to the book of nature” (pp. 154-155). However, the point here is that the distinctions between observed facts and imagined hypotheses are not a product of “literacy,” but a product of the historical, religious, and political contexts that gave rise to the Reformation and new ways to think about “text.”

In sum, if “literacy” is seen as a “necessity” today, or if it is equated with “power” in the present, this is only because it has been shaped that way through a history that has placed particular versions of “literacy” into dominant stations. Since “literacy” is never “by itself” outside of society and history, it is also not automatically equal to “power” all by itself outside of societal functions and rationales. Instead, cultural and historical relationships of power shape the conventions and meanings of “literacy,” even if the meaning of “literacy” looks like power itself. Since genealogy does not view “power” as something which can be wielded or given or taken away, a genealogical reading of history avoids analyzing who “holds” the power or who “wields” the power, but instead scrutinizes the kind of power which is behind any ordinary understandings of the world, the power which is exercised daily through the customary, practical operations of presumed knowledges and everyday discourses. In this way, “literacy” does not exist as a form of power outside of time; it exists within time and within culture, sometimes with a definition of power attached to it, sometimes not. We are at a time now where literacy is seen as a mechanism of power, a way to be powerful, but this understanding of “literacy” has its history.

Assumption Number Two:

Literacy and Progressive Technological Development

Humankind’s “development” in communication techniques (from “oral cultures” to “literate cultures” and to “electronic cultures”) has been a progression toward increasingly better ways to transmit language, and “natural” outgrowths of previous forms of communication. Literacy, therefore, is different from (better than) other forms of communication, as evidenced by the cultures who are predominantly literate and also powerful. Illiteracy is not a part of this development and is even a hindrance to it. Therefore, it is similar to a disease that needs to be cured if societies wish to continue to thrive and evolve.
The rationalizations for assumptions such as the ones grouped in this field are based entirely upon the dominant status of cultures which view themselves as superior due to the fact that they are "scientific" or "modern" or "democratic." However, an analysis of the historical and intimate relationships between "orality" and "literacy" helps to explain that humankind’s "development" from "oral cultures" to "literate cultures" is not a progression toward a better way to transmit language, nor a "natural" outgrowth of oral ways of being, but instead an unfolding of various rule-governed conventions for the circulation of language. Oral communications never went away or came back; instead, the ways people have been able to communicate orally (and about what, and through what medium), just like the ways people have been able to communicate literately (and about what and through what medium), have shifted over time with the discursive practices which name the "appropriate" means and modes of thought circulation. Once again, genealogy views the history of the "literate subject" not only in relation to the technologies of writing and print, but also in relation to social practices outside of the realm of the printed word. Shifts in the definitions of "literacy," in other words, are viewed for their complicity with social and historical beliefs and conventions, not as changes that were "meant" to happen, nor as changes that will eventually culminate in a final and best way of "being literate."

"Orality" is a relatively recent term devised and used by anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists over the past thirty years as a parallel to "literacy" (see Ong, 1982, p. 5; Thomas, 1992, p. 6). It is meant for purposes of analysis and comparison in light of the overwhelming influence of writing and print. "Oral" means "uttered by the mouth" or "spoken," and "orality" is a way of describing, in Thomas' (1992) terms, "the habit of relying entirely on oral communication rather than written" (p. 6). The term has been useful and positive in the work of Ong and others who mean to dispel the misconception that strictly oral cultures are severely limited in cultural growth and refinement. It is also meant as a way to describe "thought and its verbal expression in oral culture" as compared to "thought and expression in literature, philosophy and science, and even in oral discourse among literates, [which] are not directly native to human existence as such but have come into being because of the resources which the technology of writing makes available to human consciousness" (Ong, 1982, p. 1). Yet the term "orality" can also serve to separate two forms of cultural production which are deeply interwoven.

When it is presumed that there has been a natural and progressive development in communication techniques from the oral to the written to the printed to the electronic, the "differences" between "orality" and "literacy" that appear in the "electronic age" manifest themselves in terms defined on "literacy" grounds which are already presumed to be superior. On this terrain, where writing and print are viewed as necessary for fields of thought such as science, philosophy, and history, where "literacy" is equated with "civilization" and "progress," it is easy to understand writing, print, and electronic communications as the tools which have brought about levels of knowledge that are "higher" or "better" than the wisdom (often viewed as folk) available in primary oral cultures. However, it should be remembered that the separation of "literacy" from "orality" only occurs on a terrain where "literacy" is already overwhelmingly dominant. On this terrain, "literacy" can be outlined on the rooftops and garden penthouses of a civilized skyline, or electrified in the gated communities of technological advancements, or perpetuated in the ivory towers of scholarship and intellectual racism, while the contours of "primary orality" can barely be glimpsed from a "literate" perspective and most often must be imagined, which makes them look identical to the contours of "illiteracy."

Pattanayak (1991) depicts the contours represented in particular discourses surrounding "literacy" and its "opposite" by writing: "illiteracy is grouped with poverty, malnutrition, lack of education, and health care, while literacy is often equated with growth of productivity, child care, and the advance of civilization" (p. 105). However, this conception of literacy/illiteracy is not without its history, and is completely tied with relations of power. If we were to imagine the terrains of "primary orality," we would have to imagine a land where "illiteracy" is not a problem, not an issue by any means. "Orality," when it is truly "primary," has no visions of "literacy" or "illiteracy," since the centuries of intellectual "growth" associated with the techniques of writing are not at all significant to cultures with no knowledge whatsoever of writing. "The
introduction of writing," writes Hoyles (1977), "made illiterates inevitable" (p. 23). However, in our imaginations, we have to wonder how "inevitable" the "illiterates" could have possibly been in cultures who had been operating for centuries without writing. These cultures lived in what we would term "illiterate" environments, but they didn't know these were faulty and inferior environments, because they weren't. There was nothing to be inferior to.

When writing was "invented" around 3100 B.C., probably by the Sumerians, with the development of systems for writing occurring sometime between 3100-1599 B.C. (MacNevin, 1993; Schmandt-Besserat, 1988; Graff, 1987; Diringer, 1948), it was tied directly to spoken ideas, but was not meant to represent all spoken ideas. Writing began with pictures and direct representation, often iconographic, and then moved to more mnemonic mechanisms which carried the meanings of whole ideas behind the symbol. The representation of ideas then shifted into representations of syllables among the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Aztecs, Mayans, Chinese, Hittites, Egyptians, as well as the Indian systems of writing which greatly influenced South East Asian forms (MacNevin, 1993; Kaestle, 1988; Harris, 1986; Rahi, 1977; Carpenter, 1973; Gelb, 1952; Diringer, 1948). Yet early in this history of literacy, knowledge of hieroglyphics or iconographs was something available only to scribal priests and the elite few with whom they shared this tool (MacNevin, 1993, pp. 12-15). As an example, the word "hieroglyphics" refers to Greek to "sacred or priestly carvings", and it was believed that the only way to read the symbols was to have access to the mystical knowledge of the priests. In spite of this seemingly limited access, it should not be interpreted as a scribal scheme, as Lucas (1972) points out:

The monopolistic character of early schooling was not the conscious result of a scribal conspiracy to enlist education for the preservation of class privilege. Rather, it was a natural outgrowth of many forces shaping Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian life. Because these cultures were extremely conservative, absolutist, and sanctioned by a highly authoritarian ideology, schools also assumed such characteristics. (p. 45)

The fact that written knowledge was the property of a few and conveyed to others through oral communications is not indicative of the "power" of writing in its technological "growth," but instead, indicative of the accepted power structures and the dominant modes of communication in place at the time.

The representation of sound/syllables ultimately led to the "invention" of alphabetic systems to represent more discrete sounds. The Greek alphabet, "invented" sometime around 650-550 B.C. (MacNevin, 1993; Kaestle, 1988; Graff, 1987; Havelock, 1971), added vowels to and borrowed 19 letters from the (often forgotten) Phoenician alphabet, which was probably the first "consonantal" alphabet (Rahi, 1977, p. 14 & 16). However, as great as the Greek alphabet may have been as the "foundation" to all European alphabets in use today (Diringer, 1948), its "development" and spread had little to do with technological determinism or a "natural" development in communication technologies, since "[t]he script and the very principles of the alphabet were adopted from the Phoenicians of the Levantine coast, with whom Greeks were now increasingly in contact" (Thomas, 1992, p. 53). In fact, the alphabet was not viewed as an essential tool for the general Greek public right away, as its uses were for commercial services in line with the Phoenicians (Thomas, 1992, p. 56), or for poetic purposes (Thomas, 1992, p. 57), or "restricted to a small elite and limited to a few functions, chiefly religion" (Kaestle, 1988, p. 98). Yet even during this time of Greek alphabetic expansion, Thomas (1992) points out that "most Greek literature was meant to be heard or even sung - thus transmitted orally - and there was a strong current of distaste for the written word even among the highly literate: written documents were not considered adequate proof by themselves in legal contexts till the second half of the fourth century BC" (p. 3).

When the first schools in Greece were being formed between 500 and 400 B.C., students learned to "read" (or recite) by heart (Thomas, 1992, p. 92) because the ability to memorize and orally recite oral poetry and great philosophical works was of greatest value at the time. As the tools of reading and writing became more widespread with the advent of Greek city-states, members of the society were taught to be literate for specific political and civic functions such as "moral conduct, respect for social order, and participant citizenship" (Graff, 1987, p. 28). Meanwhile, the Greek alphabet was being transferred to the Romans through an Etruscan influence (Diringer, 1948, p. 535), and the Latin
alphabet was "born." Roman education, appearing between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. (Graff, 1987, p. 29), placed high importance on the teaching of rhetoric and oratory (obviously tied to the oral traditions of the time), which offered training in language, literature, philosophy, as well as the sciences. However, this education was used for bureaucratic purposes and patriotism, as "religion was intertwined with family life" (MacNevin, 1995, p. 79). Education in the "literacy" of the time, therefore, was an education for specific (misspelling intended) purposes.

Yet as "developmental" and "progressive" as this history may read, the main point here is that variations in the purposes and uses of "literacy" (religious, civic, commercial, bureaucratic, poetic, etc.) cannot be depicted as a linear and technological evolution across time because the ways in which "literacy" has functioned in various places and times are social and historical issues which have little to do with the tools of reading and writing "themselves." For example, after the tools of reading and writing had shifted to a phonetic, alphabetic, syntactic form, "illiteracy" may have emerged (in some places at some times) with a definition pitted against the welfare of the state, but this had nothing to do with the technologies of the alphabet or phonics or syntax. Instead, it is interrelated with the power relations and discourses of the time which perceived "literacy" as a necessity of the state. Derrida (1976) reminds us of the ethnocentrism of this history which "everywhere and always" has "controlled the concept of writing" (p. 3). He points out that "the metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example, of the alphabet)...was fundamentally - for enigmatic yet essential reasons that are inaccessible to a simple historical relativism - nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism" which controlled "the concept of writing," "the history of (the only) metaphysics," and "the concept of science" (p. 3). However, this ethnocentrism itself points to the fact that particular versions of "literacy" have lingered with the winners of the struggles, not that the struggles were won because of literacy. In this way, if a particular version of "literacy" is a perceived need, for whatever reason, then the perceived need to "become literate," for whatever purpose, helps to shape general understandings of what "illiteracy" is.

What is forgotten as the knowledge surrounding "literacy" is defined and distributed is a kind of knowledge that is locally real and equally potent: to be "illiterate" is not to be nonhuman, nonintelligent or uncivilized. If, throughout time, illiteracy has been variously equated with a savagery or a deficiency or a disease which stands in the way of progress, it has not been because these are "natural" characteristics of what it means to be "illiterate." Rather, the ever-shifting notions of "literacy" or "illiteracy" are created and defined through mechanisms of power that do not exist outside of social and historical relations. Technological advancements are never merely introduced into a culture, whether or not that culture is primarily "oral" or already highly "literate." Instead, there are specific cultural contexts which always shape how the technologies of "literacy" are perceived and how (if at all) they will fit into the established customs related to the production and circulation of thought. Just as the "electronic age" (as we know it) depends upon writing and print, the historically contingent technologies of the "literate" are dependent upon tremendously complex interrelations involving oral communications.

Seemingly "progressive" shifts in the technologies of "literacy" appear at moments when whole new technologies are "invented," like systems of writing, or the alphabet, or the printing press, or e-mail. Some of the ways in which people have been able to organize thought and knowledge may not have been thinkable without writing or print or electronic note passing, and yet, the ways in which people have organized thought and knowledge have varied greatly over time even when the same technology (writing) was being used. For example, during a time when cultural dialects were seen as a threat to national cohesion (the end of the nineteenth century in the United States), instruction in "literacy" involved having students place their toes on straight lines (where the saying, "toe the line," came from) while they stuck out and wiggled their tongues (see Myers, 1996, pp. 64-65). This type of "literacy" was valued because it included the appropriate pronunciation of written words and phrases, whereas the kind of "literacy" valued in another era (say right now) means that students work together in small groups to compose daily news stories, during a time when businesses are encouraging "cooperative". In addition, the type of "literate" knowledge involved in the development of electronic technologies was valued for its possibilities of better communication during the first World
War. These variations in the values and uses of "literacy" are not dependent upon what literacy "is," but instead on the demands of social and historical circumstances. Changes in the meanings and uses of "literacy" shift according to transformations in the discursive practices which delineate how knowledge is "best" circulated, valorized, attributed, and appropriated.

Therefore, communication techniques do not merely develop in a progressive succession from worse to better, but instead, the ways in which human beings communicate vary over time due to struggles over purpose/pedagogies/procedures. This is not a matter of right and wrong, but a matter of history and power. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to debate whether or not "advancements" in communication techniques could have happened (or been "discovered") without reading and writing, it is clear that "literacy," by itself, did not progressively "develop" on its own in a technologically determined dance. This is because "literacy" cannot exist "by itself" outside of cultural and historical relations of power. The "necessity" of reading and writing for technological "progress" is only as "necessary" as cultural and historical circumstances will allow.

Assumption Number Three: Literacy and Educational Understandings of Text, Author, Reader

The definition of "text" entails the printed word. "Texts" are something from which to extract the author's meaning, and while a reader's interpretation is certainly an interest of education, there is a division between what is actually said, or "given," in the text, and the possible interpretations a reader can make of it. Educationally, therefore, we have the responsibility to teach children how to get meaning from a text by reading, and how to put meaning into a text by writing. There are particular educational devices and materials regarding the instruction of reading and writing that are essential for teachers to teach and students to learn. Electronic technologies would not have come about without literacy; however, many forms of electronic technologies have nothing to do with literacy per se. In fact, "e-literacies" which deal with non-print (television, mass media, hypermedia, virtual reality) may be posing a serious threat to the future of literate cultures and literacy itself.

"Text" is one of those concepts that didn't exist before writing and print. However, like any concept, its definition is subject to change over time and within particular contexts of thinkability. For example, in certain contexts "text" has been expanded to include more than the printed word. When "literacies" began to analyze "oral" cultures, both past and present, a re-defined "text" which has nothing to do with the printed word became usable and thinkable as a way to validate oral cultural traditions and productions. While "oral text" may seem (to some) like an oxymoron, to others, it has stood as a useful way to compare and analyze language structures and patterns of thought circulation. In addition, and quite recently, the meaning of "text" is beginning to undergo a wider change in educational fields, as demonstrated by the newly released Standards for the English Language Arts (NCTE & IRA, 1996). In it, "text" refers not only to printed texts, but also to spoken language, graphics, and technological communications; language "encompasses visual communication in addition to spoken and written forms of expression"; and reading "refers to listening and viewing in addition to print-oriented reading." However, U.S. National Standards or not, this new meaning of "text" is not commonplace in U.S. classrooms. Educationally, "text" still refers to, for the most part, that which is printed: text where the author is still in control of meaning, text that is necessarily linear in its flow from beginning to end, text where the reader's role is to decipher (and possibly use) the meaning. Assessment of a student's reading ability revolves around the general comprehension of the author's meaning, or the particular knowledge of word recognition and decoding skills used to "get" meaning from the text.

Meanwhile, wider meanings of "text," which have been talked about by thinkers such as Bakhtin, Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault, and which are gaining momentum in scholarly circles and technological circuits, have not yet made it to public school classrooms either. There may be a reason why: the prospects might look just plain silly in the classrooms we know and aloofly like. This is, after all, the here-and-
now, completely equipped with the inertias of the that-which-is-thinkable-just-now. It doesn’t fit into the standard curriculum to require that students analyze their own interpretations in terms of a network of contingencies, as the theorists mentioned above might advise. The teacher-as-lecturer-using-the-English-of-yesteryear doesn’t lend herself well to a consideration of the plurality of texts formed at the intersection of several consciousnesses. The materials available - the things that we call “texts” - do not come embedded in auditory and visual communication experiences, at least not in class sizes of thirty.

The common understandings of text, author, and reader are based in part on the structures of language in print. There is a given (or fixed) meaning to be discovered in the text, someplace between the beginning and the end; there is the need for the antecedents of conclusions to line up in a coherent order determined by the established customs of "appropriate" reasoning. What is said and the way it is said still need to conform to the conventions of language in print, which is to say language contained within a definitive piece, the word on the page, the author in charge. When the author is in charge, the author’s meaning is central to interpretation. A reader’s interpretation is in jeopardy of being "wrong" when it departs the "grounded" text because many of the words on the page still have particular references which do not permit completely free interpretation. It is a chicken that crossed the road, for example, not a cow or a goat. Text is understood as a fairly autonomous entity in this view because it holds a distinct meaning (the author’s) for the reader to "get."

Yet "text" has not always been so independent, as evidenced in ancient Greek documents which left a lot unsaid, relying instead on the remembered and presupposed knowledge of the reader (Thomas, 1992, p. 76). And "text" may not always be thought of in its linear, self-contained, and printed sense, with the types of "texts" available through electronic communications, such as hypertext or virtual reality. The point is that fluctuations in the commonly understood definitions of text, author, or reader are related to fluctuations in discursive practices, transformations which are linked to larger shifts in understandings that extend beyond any new definitions of "text" or any new definitions of what literacy "is." Myers (1996) asks:

Why does a society decide to change its mind about its literacy practices? Societies do not develop something called intelligence or English teaching and then invent new standards of literacy from the possibilities of that intelligence or English teaching. Instead, a standard of literacy - or what we call a skill - is the result of an interaction among such variables as urbanization (Lerner 1958), the political interactions of Protestantism and capitalism (Tyack 1974), the religious beliefs of Calvinism (Lockridge 1974), secularism (Clanchy 1979), technology like the printing press (Eisenstein 1979), mass media (Schramm and Ruggles 1967), fertility rates (Vinovskis 1981), and a failing and/or growing economy (Reich 1992). (Myers, 1996, p. 5)

However, all of these "variables" that help to define a standard of literacy can also be described as manifestations of the discursive practices of the time. If a society thinks it has "decide[d] to change its mind about its literacy practices," it is not without relations of power already established in discursive practices which constitute taken-for-granted discourses of truth. Any changes in the definition of "literacy" and any corresponding institutional changes in pedagogy do not occur as simply as a "change in the mind" might imply.

The components that help to define a standard of "literacy" need to be invested with relevance before whole systems of thought can be shifted, while the notion of "relevance" is tied not to fertility rates, nor to the political interactions between Protestantism and capitalism, but rather, and more consistently, to the discursive practices of the time. This is not to say that factors such as fertility rates, politics, religious beliefs, or the printing press have nothing to do with changes in the definition of "literacy," but rather, it is to say that factors which are seen as important in the transformation of "literacy" are only valued as consequential through discursive practices that validate particular perspectives and disregard others.

If the commonly understood meaning of "text" expands to include such ideas as "interextuality," "multivocality," or the "de-centering" of a singular author (see, for example, Landow, 1992, pp. 10-13), this shift will not occur without transformations in the discursive practices that set forth appropriate modes of thought circulation, valorization, attribution, and appropriation. If the definition of "literacy" is currently in a state of transition to include the negotiation of multiple perspectives and the interpretation of various texts, the factors of importance may
be a growth in informational services coupled with wider international relations. The discursive practices surrounding the tools of "literacy" (electronic or otherwise) establish understandings of what text "is," which texts are more valuable, who has the authority to decide, and what we're supposed to do with the text in order to be called "literate," if we're called "literate" at all. In other words, what it could mean to be "literate" within the framework of a broadened definition of "text" will be dependent upon the "accepted" and valued productions of a culture, what those productions require of the "literate," and whether those productions incorporate the wide-spread use of the materials which enlarge the meaning of text.

In the "electronic age," with telephones, televisions, movies, films-trips, hypermedia, and virtual reality (for example), we are living in an age of "secondary orality" which depends upon writing and print for its existence (see Ong, 1982, p. 3). This can mean anything from the fact that oral television scripts are written down to the fact that writing was necessary for the invention of the telephone, on which we communicate orally. The use of many of these electronic communication devices (television, telephone, radio) is indeed wide-spread. However, the "secondary" portion of television and telephones and hypermedia and virtual reality can also mean that the acts of using these technologies have little to do with "literacy" as we understand it today, if we understand it to mean reading or writing a printed text. If writing and print are not always immediately apparent in the stylistic communication of thoughts through sound, the common understandings of the day may not be apt to place these actions within the realm of "literate" communication. When non-print electronic technologies are viewed as non-literate, they are put in a position outside of "true" educational value. They are seen as demonstrational extras, appreciated for their entertainment value, but it's time to get back to work, boys and girls.

Because the factors which change definitions and tools of "literacy" do not exist outside of temporarily static definitions of what counts as important, what counts as truth, what counts as valuable knowledge, we are not in the position to know whether or not communicating through electronic (including non-print) means will be a focus of "literacy" education. We are not in the position to know where things may go or what will be the end, since we are not in the position to make truth and knowledge "up." However, through the active disruption of common assumptions surrounding "literacy," we could potentially be in a position to see that there are alternate possibilities.

Alternate Possibilities

If you are reading this with the technologies of a late twentieth century Western "literate," your perceptions of this paper are driven in part by an attempt to tweeze out some kind of knowledge from a text you may never have seen before; you are silently analyzing its parts, its self-contained structure, its syntax, its semantics, as your unvoiced inner-voice goes about decoding its meaning; you have objectified it in such a way that the intelligent productions transpiring in your mind are occurring on a completely individualized level; you may even have some well-tuned academic skills for recording or storing any information that your thoughts have brought about.

Yet, this has not always been the way that people have "read" a text. What it means to read, and to read well, as history has shown, is completely dependent on a culture and a time, if it's even an issue of importance at all. People and cultures, in other words, do not devise a meaning for "literacy" and then simply "do" it. The discursive practises of the time determine what one is to "do" when one is "being literate," and this in turn determines the range of possible interpretations and perceptions of whatever is being "read."

This having been said, the discursive practises of our time may be changing in such a way that we can imagine a form of "literacy" which includes more than accepting the "text" as a fixed or given word, more than accepting writing and print as the superior mode of knowledge circulation, more than accepting the authority of the author. For example, with electronic communications, we can begin to imagine how perceptions of "text" and "authorship" and "readership" may be different.

When we are able to think of "text" differently, of "readership" and "authorship" differently, then the possibilities for the types of knowledges which are valued begin to look different too. Landow (1993) explores this line of thinking in relation to an altered understanding of "text":
One tends to think of text from within the position of the lexis under consideration. Accustomed to reading pages of print on paper, one tends to conceive of text from the vantage point of the reader experiencing that page or passage, and that portion of text assumes a centrality. Hypertext, however, makes such assumptions of centrality fundamentally problematic. Hypertext similarly emphasizes that the marginal has as much to offer as does the central, in part because hypertext does not only redefine the central by refusing to grant centrality to anything, to any lexis, for more than the time a gaze rests upon it. In hypertext, centrality, like beauty and relevance, resides in the mind of the beholder. (pp. 69-70)

In addition, the roles of "author" and "reader" in many forms of electronic communications are fundamentally reconfigured. With hypertextual configurations, "authorial" control is shifted a degree or two to the reader, who gets "to choose his or her way through the metatext, to annotate text written by others, and to create links between documents written by others" (Landow, 1993, p. 71). In on-line multimedia experiences, readers are not confined to a limited realm of information such as found in books or on hypertextual CD-ROMS, but instead, the reader can move in an array of visual images and sound, text and non-text, choosing between generalities and specifics presented by numerous authors and artists. As another example, the conversations which take place through written on-line conferencing, such as experienced through Multiple-User Dimensions (MUDs) or MOOs (MUD Object Oriented), occur in real time and on the highly present terrain of the computer screen, a place that seems "real" as the conversation is occurring. The lines between author and reader are transparent here since one can take on both identities as the conversation, or "text," transpires according to group interaction, not a singular authority. In addition, digital technologies allow for audiences of one, where the "reader" can order up extremely personalized information (see, for example, Negroponte, 1995); and virtual reality programs make the distinction between author and reader invisible as the "reader" (who may not have a written text anywhere nearby) "writes" the actions and progressions of the experienced "text."

When the minds of the literates are informed by discursive practices that allow for reconfigured versions of text, author, and reader, there are a variety of possible ways to perceive the act of "being literate. A related set of assumptions emerges. For example, to negotiate within this understanding of text could require a kind of confidence and a sense of self, coupled with an ability to take risks (see Myers, 1996, chapter 8). Since the uses of "literacy" in the electronic circulation and production of knowledge are perceived (at this point in time) to be self-monitored and self-determined, it is possible that the "literate subject" may be assumed to be an autonomous agent of knowledge production. This "literate subject" would be one who lives in the intertextuality of language and interpretation, one who is confronted by various paths or "choices" in the production of knowledge (see, for example, Landow, 1992; Bolter, 1991).

In line with the assumption that "literacy" is a form of "power," this "e-literate" subject might be imagined to have a type of individual "power" in choosing "self-determined" paths of learning and textual exploration. When the educational possibilities of a "literacy" defined in electronic circumstances include the construction of a subject who is assumed to be "autonomous" with electronic media, the "e-literate" subject may also take the form of an "individual" who is not only "self-determined," but also "self-aware" of his or her own role in the creation of meaning. This subject could possibly be skillful at interrogating received representations, able to read symptomatically in an increasingly global field, and capable of analyzing positions and interpretations through the critique of accepted histories.

Lest this seems too speculative in the inertias and constraints of the present time, these possibilities for "e-literacies" are not too far off from what the Standards for the English Language Arts (1996) are proposing. Although the use of electronic communications is not necessary for this version of "literacy," which Myers (1996) calls "translation literacy," it still involves the "interpretation of many texts, producing multiple translations of many different kinds of texts in many sign systems" (p. 57). In numerous classrooms all over the United States, teachers are already preparing students to find their ways on their own, to be risk-takers and metacognitive thinkers, to question themselves at every point, by asking students to keep (for example) journals of the problems and highlights they encounter while reading, or by encouraging students to