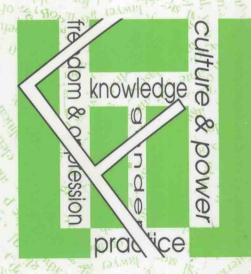# Knowledge, Culture & Power:

International Perspectives on Literacy as Policy and Practice

Edited by Peter Freebody and Anthony R. Welch

knowledge

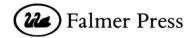freedom & oppression

culture & power

practice

The Falmer Press

Knowledge, Culture and Power:
International Perspectives on Literacy as Policy and Practice

Edited by

Peter Freebody and Anthony R. Welch

First published 1993

Contents

Contents

此为试读，需要完整PDF请访问：www.ertongbook.com

Series Editor's Introduction

Sign of the times: a Canadian rock band, signed to a multinational recording contract, declared itself 'post-everything', specifically, 'post-punk', 'post-new wave', 'post-rap' and, of course, 'post-postmodern'. This is new, improved, first world marketing discourse *par excellence*. To declare difference in the context of a culture which thrives on traditions of the new is to sell. To be at the aesthetic margins has become a commodity, a means to enter profitably into the very discourses and practices which promote differences of economic centres and margins in the first place.

For the significant majority of the world's populace, to stand at the economic, political and aesthetic margins is not a matter of choice, of guise, or of marketing. Like Third World debt and First World under-employment, it is non-negotiable, whether scripted in terms of gender or colour, poverty or disease. However represented and mass mediated, *this* marginality is not a figment of discourse. Nor can it readily be critiqued and reconstructed by the individuals and groups in question. This is particularly the case for those without rudimentary access to economic, social and human services — and, not coincidentally, as this volume points out, for those without access to literacies.

If we take 'rewriting', 'writing and reading against the grain' and deconstruction as current metaphors for political action, it is important to recall that one cannot rewrite when one cannot write. If we take 'high tech', on-line literacies as the new nexus of power — the job skills upon which an updated human capital model of social and economic development turns — it is important to recall that one cannot get on-line without rudimentary hardware, affordable access to a reliable telecommunications network *and* a base mastery of the alphabetic system. The privilege of textual criticism and analysis, information and interpretation is, feminists of colour remind us, an occupational brief dominated by First World, male intelligentsia (Hooks, 1990; Mohanty, Russo and Torres, 1991).

What has come to count as post-modern culture is driven by what has been variously described as 'late', 'advanced' and post-industrial capitalism. But running beneath the narrative of post-modernism is a transnational division of labour and resources (Lash and Urry, 1987). Although the names of the key players, social movements and 'isms' have changed, many communities' socio-economic possibilities and opportunities have remained the same, or deteriorated. The

outsiders remain underemployed and disenfranchised women, ethnic and cultural minorities, Aboriginal peoples, and an emergent white underclass in late capitalist countries. In what have been deemed 'developed' and 'developing' countries, many of these communities labour silently in the shadows and margins of the cultural 'post-everything'. As the case studies in *Knowledge, Culture and Power* show, a significant aspect of these communities' and groups' disenfranchisement is still tied up with illiteracy, undereducation and miseducation.

These concerns are shunted to the sidelines in educational discourse, to the subfields of language planning, comparative education and minority education: 'electives' at best in most educators' study and training, add-on topics in discussions of pedagogy and curriculum, and exceptional cases in mainstream accounts of psychological development. Hence it is important, as Welch and Freebody remind us in their initial chapter, to return to material factors of class and power, however elusive such phenomena might be, and however inseparable from gender and colour. Particularly in light of recent reorganizations of European nation-states, the persistence of regional and ethnic identity — it is also crucial for educators to return to recognition of those 'outsiders' from cultures of literacy described by the likes of Freire and Fanon, Garcia Marquez and bell hooks, but with renewed focus on the dynamics of post-colonialism, multi-national economies, and policies of economic rationalism.

It has been over a decade since Graff (1979) coined the term 'literacy myth' to refer to those longstanding ideological claims which have dominated nineteenth and twentieth century political and academic debate over literacy. As Collins, O'Connor, Freebody and Welch point out, the uncritical affiliation of literacy with a range of social and economic effects — and of its 'other', illiteracy, with diametrically opposing effects — has retained a great deal of currency among policy-makers, educators and the public. Belief in literacy as a singular cause of technological, social and economic development continues to rhetorically mask economic and social problems of marginal groups — whether the Indian underclass described by Kumar, Northern Territory Aborigines described by Walton, the adult unemployed in Australia discussed by O'Connor, or the 'underprepared' American university entrants studied by Collins. In such instances the literacy/human capital rationale acts as a discourse technology for blaming victims, for shifting responsibility from systemically constituted inequality to already marginal individuals and groups.

Knowledge, Culture and Power presents case studies of literacy policies and campaigns, pedagogies and methods. These cover a broad range of contemporary national and regional contexts, tracing the social and political contingency of literacy and education in neo-colonial and post-colonial, industrial and post-industrial, North and South countries. As Limage's overview chapter suggests, international patterns can be drawn from these and other cases, especially those of consistent declines in public sector spending and the emergence of powerful discourses of 'economic rationalism'. Basic educational services of children and adults have been hard hit in 'developed' and 'developing' countries alike and, in spite of the progress in world literacy campaigns documented by UNESCO, it is increasingly difficult to sustain international, regional and local efforts at literacy education.

Yet Limage's overview of post-war literacy campaigns and Welch and Freebody's hypotheses about current 'literacy crises' caution against

over-generalizations about the causes and consequences of the social and eco-
nomic 'problem' of illiteracy. As importantly, they enable us to put into historical
and comparative perspective claims about the universal relevance and efficacy
of particular pedagogical schemes. Literacy pedagogies and curricula are by
definition the textual representations and products of particular cultural contexts,
institutional conditions and political interests. The educational formation and
framing of a literate 'tradition' — an official language of instruction, a corpus of
texts, reading and writing practices and events — is not an arbitrary or 'natural'
decision, but is an extension of extant ideological, discursive and material
relations. How pedagogies are done, and what they enable and disenable for
students and teachers in programmes and classrooms, is further constrained by
local and regional contexts. Hence, we can identify particular international trends
in educational and social policy. But to judge literacy pedagogies in terms of their
putative 'universality' and 'truth' is to deny in the first instance their basis in the
local and regional politics of curriculum. Such a perspective risks perpetuating
the century-long Anglo-American assumption — introduced into post-war
international education by William S. Gray and other educational psychologists
— that the real work of literacy education is about articulating and deploying the
scientifically 'correct' and most 'efficient' pedagogy.

An alternative is to reconsider pedagogies in terms of the kinds of literacies
they are capable of constructing for particular populaces, and of the applicability
of these literacies to the economic and political possibilities and aspirations of
the populaces in question (Baker and Luke, 1991). If indeed pedagogic discourse
and power are realized differently in local institutional sites (Foucault, 1972) —
the same pedagogy, the same curricula, even the same textbooks or materials,
can generate varying, if not outright contradictory effects. What might appear an
emancipatory agenda for a specific clientele can have very different effects and
consequences in other educational systems and contexts. We can contrast, for
instance, Walton's critique of progressive education for Northern Territory Abori-
gines, with Kumar's view of student-centred pedagogy as a seminal means for
enfranchising students from Indian underclasses. Kumar, and Ahai and Faraclas
argue that 'rote', skills-based approaches to literacy effectively construct 'failure'
and 'deficit' for lower socio-economic class students in the post-colonial
educational systems of, respectively, India and Papua New Guinea. Traditional
and 'technocratic' approaches, they argue, should be supplanted by some of the
very methods and approaches to literacy education which Walton and colleagues
criticize as having reproductive, stratifying consequences in Australian systems.
These and other analyses point to the site specificity and relevance of pedagogical
constructs and effects, an insight at the heart of Freire's early project but often
lost in the will towards grand designs, radical and conservative alike, for literacy
education.

What seems key is the hypothesis developed by Heath (1986) at the micro-
ethnographic level: without significant, institutional supports and functions
in everyday life, literate practices are at best difficult to teach, and, at worst,
practically unsustainable. Like language maintenance, the propagation of literacy
in a given community is contingent on: first, enabling 'institutional supports',
strategies and policies; and, second, the necessity for texts and textuality in
daily economic and cultural practices. These would appear to be necessary and
sufficient conditions for sustainable cultures and subcultures of literacy. Particular

strategies discussed here — among them Papua New Guinea's English language education policy, Northern Territory Aboriginal education policy — founder not because they are 'wrong' in any absolute scientific and ethical sense (though they well could be), but precisely because they fail to consider the local, the tactical, the quotidian. At the same time, the case studies by Hassanpour, Ahai and Faraclas and Lankshear show that it would be equally erroneous to view language and literacy education as 'stand alone', local matters. The futures of diverse strategies like Kurdish revolutionary literacy, Singaporean 'Speak Mandarin' language reforms and the Nicaraguan literacy campaign hinge on their continued centrality in the cultural and political lives of these communities.

These cultural and political lives are increasingly implicated in geopolitical and multinational corporate agenda far beyond the immediate control of any particular domestic policy and jurisdiction, revolutionary or otherwise (Mintz and Schwartz, 1990). First world economic and legitimation crises have global effects, including the tendency to 'export' economic rationalist, technocratic approaches to social and cultural problems. In this regard, the 'literacy crises' to which Freebody and Welch return in their final chapter have a dual effect: first, to shift the focus away from the localized and regional character of literacy and language education problems; and second, to obscure larger socio-economic and increasingly transnational forces which shape the structure and character of work, culture, and ultimately such sectors as schooling. A focus on the universal 'promise' of literacy as a protagonist in the narratives of skill expansion and economic growth is an ideological move *par excellence*. As Collins here eloquently comments, it at once silences and naturalizes a powerful 'dark secret': that literacy has been and continues to be a crucial means not for social integration and enfranchisement into a public domain of democratic discourse, but a means for institutionally constructing and imposing difference and marginality.

We can change and rename the rules of the game: from industrial to post-industrial, from monopoly to multinational, from modern to post-modern. But for the communities described here, the next century appears to hold in store more of the same: an educational politics of exclusion and marginality. For these same communities, the advent of microchip technologies has superimposed another grid — that of information 'wealth' versus information 'poverty' — on top of longstanding economic and cultural exclusion. *Knowledge, Culture and Power* focuses us on the need for tactical analyses of the politics of literacy in local institutions — whether regional schooling jurisdictions, rural communities, or urban universities. At the same time, it insists throughout on the futility of literacy reform without larger socio-economic analysis and strategy.

<div align="right">

Allan Luke
Townsville
Queensland, Australia
31 November 1991

</div>

References

BAKER, C.D. and LUKE, A. (Eds) (1991) *Towards a Critical Sociology of Reading Pedagogy*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

FOUCAULT, M. (1972) 'The Eye of Power', in GORDON, C. (Ed.) *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings by Michel Foucault*, New York, Pantheon, pp. 145–65.

GRAFF, H.J. (1979) *The Literacy Myth*, New York, Academic Press.

HEATH, S.B. (1986) 'Critical factors in literacy development', in DECASTELL, S., LUKE, A. and EGAN, K. (Eds) *Literacy, Society and Schooling*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 209–32.

HOOKS, B. (1990) *Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, Boston, South End Press.

LASH, S. and URRY, J. (1987) *The End of Organized Capitalism*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

MINTZ, B. and SCHWARTZ, M. (1990) 'Capital flows and the process of financial hegemony', in ZUKIN, S. and DiMAGGIO, P. (Eds) *Structures of Capital*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 203–26.

MOHANTY, C., RUSSO, A. and TORRES, L. (1991) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Explanations of the Current International 'Literacy Crises'

Anthony R. Welch and Peter Freebody

Introduction

The almost archetypal innocence of a scene in which one person helps another learn to read or write is matched by the ideological innocence claimed by the disciplines that once exclusively informed that scene — Psychology, Human Development, and Educational Measurement. But the study of reading and writing has become a political pursuit. The most significant events in recent theorizing about reading and writing have been the applications of critical perspectives from sociology, anthropology, history, politics, linguistics, and economics to the study of literacy and literacy education. These perspectives, exemplified in anthologies edited by Baker and Luke (1991), Street (in press/1992), and Wagner (1987), have not only contextualized but have often countered the three traditionally dominant accounts of literacy: the growth-through-heritage account, the cognitive-psychological account, and the skills-and-measurement account (Gilbert, 1989, see especially Chapter 1).

The perspectives on literacy arising from this comparatively new cross-disciplinary attention in turn provide the grounds for critiques of both technicist and progressivist accounts of literacy education. The 'great debate' between so-called skills and meaning approaches to literacy teaching (presented by Chall, 1967) has been put into its historical and ideological context (Christie, 1990), and the ways in which it has blinkered the exploration of literacy practices are beginning to be documented (Gee, 1990).

The increasingly prevalent use of the term 'literacy practices' instead of the massifying term 'literacy' reflects the variety of social activities to which literacy is crucial, and the interconnections of literacy activities with other cultural practices in specific settings such as schools, factories, and churches (Grillo, 1989). The term 'literacy practices' also signifies that it is daily material activities that are the topics of literacy study, rather than abstractions drawn from psychological or institutional theorizing.

It is fast becoming commonplace, therefore, to assert that literacy practices are not ideologically innocent. They do not merely meet cultural and individual needs: rather they shape both the ways in which cultures develop socio-economic arrangements and the ways in which literate individuals develop 'adaptive'

psychological dispositions and cognitive strategies (Ong, 1982, presents the strongest case for the influence of literacy on consciousness). In a literate culture, neither inter- nor intra-personal conditions are unaffected by the technologies of literacy. This idea — which may be expressed by the slogan that literacy practices are culturally and psychologically emergent — is a central scaffold that is taken for granted by a growing number of scholars, educators, and policy-makers. The aim of this book is simply to give body to that scaffold — to provide practical and visible illustrations from around the world of the point that literacy practices reflect and themselves build dominant political and socio-cultural experience.

Understanding the process by which literacy practices come to be the matter of ideology, as much as they are its vehicle, depends partly on understanding the idea of 'selective tradition' (Williams, 1977). Of the many possible forms in which literacy activities could develop and be put to work (in schools, offices, factories, churches, government departments, homes, and so on), some are recruited by a culture and others are ignored or marginalized. The successful forms themselves, by the psychological attributes and interpersonal relations they encourage, highlight and value some ways of behaving, using language, and knowing, and marginalize others. It is this understanding, shown in its many expressions in this volume, that most directly challenges the assumption that literacy is exhaustively defined as a set of psychological skills, and is thus measurable, transportable, and packagable.

In this book the political edge of literacy practices is given a wide variety of manifestations: in the chapters that follow, the idea that literacy both builds and reflects socio-economic and political contexts is acted out, in some circumstances, by soldiers who forcibly enter houses to search for and destroy printing presses, in other circumstances, by a government's withdrawal of funding from multi- or bilingual programmes in schools, and, in yet other circumstances, by the writers of university policy documents that subtly interweave propositions about economic and cultural capital with advice about literacy 'help'. This book is about why events such as these have more in common than first appears. As such it is a distinctive documentation of inflections — differences that together point directly toward the need to embed descriptions of literacy practices in the broader socio-economic narratives in which they play crucial parts. It is a book in which the contributors collectively lay to rest, through concrete illustration rather than through assertion, the innocence of literacy.

The contributors' task was to show, in material social and political practices and in the documents that support them, the heavy ideological duties to which nations and sub-national cultures have put selective notions of 'literacy'. As such it is a collection written for and about its time. Perhaps many of the examples described in the following chapters will not obtain within just a few years or even months of writing. But the goals of the contributors are partly heuristic: to stimulate and focus impatience with the preoccupation with 'white-room/ black-box' descriptions of literacy practices, and equally with intellectualized generalizations about the liberating or oppressing effects of some unitary version of literacy; and to show the variety of sites in which to view the versatile and generally unobtrusive ways that literacy practices connect knowledge, culture, and power in the process of enhancing or challenging privileged discourses.

These are the themes that give coherence to the diverse instances presented in this book. Many of the chapters demonstrate how literacy and language policies

are cut across by discourses based on racist, classist, sexist, or adultist ideologies. By linking literacy to economic development, certain malformations of power (Luke, McHoul and Mey, 1990) may deny authority and even involvement to the very people in whose interests the literacy and language policies were said to have been formulated. Thus, important questions about literacy hinge on relativities of power: what political, social and economic agenda are pursued under the guise of literacy policies? Whose interests are being served by particular literacy and plans?

Many of the contributors to this book explicitly consider literacy practices in the context of class, ethnicity, and gender; but all to some extent relate their analyses of literacy to marginalized groups in society. A few examples: Limage's chapter discusses principally large-scale policy issues, but also draws attention to some features of the micro-processes at work in the allocation of human and capital resources for literacy education from nation to nation and within each nation. Her argument points out some of the international dilemmas arising from differentiations based on racial and economic distinctions. The chapters by Walton and Hassanpour examine the problems and prospects of Fourth World, dispossessed minorities in a situation of diminished cultural and thus educational power. Collins examines the ways in which certain discursive formations constituting race, class and gender relations are evidenced in writing programs in American colleges.

Thus, in this collection, forms of literacy education and policy are interrogated for the ways in which they value and build certain kinds of competences and dispositions: ways of thinking and feeling, and ways of positioning oneself with respect to sub-cultural reference groups (based on gender, class, ethnicity, or generation) and to the society's powerful institutions. Literacy educators and policy-makers show the influence they have in shaping these competences and dispositions most dramatically when the question arises of what will be defined as acceptable levels and forms of competence with written text — that is, in debates on 'standards'. The ways in which contesting groups argue out the business of standards, and the assumptions they make about the need for and significance of literacy standards are a function of the historical, political, and economic conditions pertaining in a given culture. It is important, then, prior to a more formal introduction to the chapters that follow, to clarify some issues concerning literacy standards and the ways in which that notion is used in public debates.

Connecting Literacy and Power through 'Standards'

Literacy education is at the centre of debates about society and instruction, in and out of school. As such it is a site from which to view the shifting fortunes of contesting interests: public and private, working class and bourgeois, male and female, host communities and ethnic minorities, and, increasingly, school, work-place, and market-place. Further, these contests often target the issue of standards of literacy, rather than, say, the methods or materials of literacy education. Over many decades, perhaps most forcefully in Western nations, there have recurred assertions that school and community standards in literacy are falling and that this decline has direct consequences for economic performance and cultural levels. As a starting point, then, it seems important to explore and critique the

major hypothetical explanations for these assertions about literacy standards, as a way of providing the broad context for the contributions that follow.

Many arguments about literacy standards can be seen as inflections of one or more of the following four hypotheses:

1. *The Slide Hypothesis*: That the rhetoric of concern about literacy standards is indeed a result of genuinely declining standards in the recent past in the literacy competence of school students or perhaps of nations or sub-national groups;
2. *The Demands Hypothesis*: That, while competences have not declined, the requisite literacy competences for effective civil, social, and cultural functioning have increased and diversified in our society;
3. *The Credentials Hypothesis*: That, while neither competences nor cultural demands may have changed significantly, the increased competitiveness of the labour market, and/or the decline in work-force numbers of low-literacy occupations in a society have led to an increase in the necessary formal credentials for any given job; and
4. *The Invention Hypothesis*: That the rhetoric of concern about literacy standards is, like the concept of 'standards' itself, a confection, designed or at least functioning to undermine certain progressive or socially powerful educational trends that have developed in the recent past.

We will now deal with each of these hypotheses briefly, pointing at times to the ways in which these considerations frame the contributions that follow.

The Slide Hypothesis

What empirical support is there for the hypothesis that there has been a recent and general decline in literacy competences in recent years? We need first to consider some methodological issues involved in possible answers to this question. It turns out that serious problems arise for researchers aiming to document generalizations about changes over time in literacy competence. Attempts to plot performance rates for groups of people over a period of time must deal with a shifting average. The establishment over time of stable levels of literacy performance with changing samples of people becomes possible only in the most abstract terms.

Comparing the performance levels, for example, of a certain group of same-aged students over a long period assumes that the composition of the samples on the multiple occasions has remained stable on variables other than age that may relate to literacy performance (such as socio-economic status or ethnicity), such that all samples in fact represent the same hypothetical population. Assessing over time the literacy activities of a group standardized by the fact that they have successively worked at the same job calls into play similar questions about the stability of the work-force (first language status or educational levels) in that position at differing points in the economic or cultural history of that society. It is clear that in periods of migration or economic change the critical assumptions cannot be made safely in either of these cases. In addition, statistical and analytic capabilities and fashions among the research community change over time.

Confidence in item reliability, scoring reliability, comparability in testing conditions, and the nature of the statistical analyses applied are all issues which bear directly on the ability to compare literacy performance across extensive periods of time. These issues assume particular importance when it is considered that the sample sizes used in such survey test programmes are usually sufficiently large to allow small absolute differences in performance levels to assume statistical significance.

These are some of the doubts arising just on the grounds of sampling and measurement that trouble the 'slide hypothesis'. There are further significant theoretical questions that could be pursued: about the relevance of test materials to the actual literacy practices that have developed in the school or the workplace, and about the attendant difficulties and biases introduced by the incursion of the school's form of 'read-remember-comment' literacy into contexts other than school (Heap, 1987).

All of these constraints upon reliability and validity of empirical studies about standards of literacy over time need to be kept in mind when considering the available research, in particular on the matter of the onus of proof. In a statistical sense, the null hypothesis is that standards of literacy performance among comparable groups of people have not changed. In the light of changing school clienteles, changing pedagogies, and changing methods of performance assessment, the difficult task of proving that standards have either increased or decreased lies squarely with those who wish to argue for an observable change in performance levels. That is, until proven wrong, we need to assume that general standards of literacy have remained precisely stable over time.

In addition, some account needs to be offered that would describe the network of factors functioning to cause a genuine decline in text-management competences among members of a society or groups within it. These accounts themselves can then be interrogated for evidence of recruitment in ideological agenda. The following are a sample of such accounts:

1. Certain class-reproductive or ethnocentric pedagogical methods may become prevalent which, in subsequent times of economic contraction or in times in which previously disenfranchised groups come to be offered more complete educational access, result in overall sample decline (see Bernstein, 1975);

2. Governments may allow salaries and conditions of teachers to decline in comparison with comparable occupations such that the literacy experiences and competences of beginning teachers change, and/or available literacy materials for school and workplace literacy programs diminish;

3. Political pressure may be placed upon teachers and school authorities to respond to certain apparent market forces by emphasizing areas of curriculum that are, again apparently, less demanding of literacy competence in their study and assessment;

4. A process of migration of traditional groups to urban, Westernized commercial centres may initially bring with it an increase in the proportion of the population engaged in white-collar occupations. Thus these migrants encounter increased textual demands, and subsequently more of their children attend school. Later, this migration may subside or in fact be reversed such that a rural reconstruction is attempted

and earlier increases in overall community literacy competences are
halted or reversed.

All of these accounts implicate genuinely changing socio-economic conditions, or
changing perceptions in the relationship between literacy education and cultural
and economic development. However, the 'slide hypothesis' is generally presented
in a functional vacuum, as if teachers or students were wilfully derelict either
in their appreciation of the value of literacy or in their competence to teach and
learn it. Such characterizations hail the ideologies of both class and generation,
and 'literacy', as an unquestioned commodity, comes to be used as a legitimator of
class and generational privilege.

Thus there are serious empirical problems in substantiating the 'slide hypo-
thesis', and the explanations that are generally called upon to account for this
slippery phenomenon are generally ideologically motivated. In the face of a lack
of reliable empirical support, the methodologically appropriate move is to 'fail to
reject the hypothesis of no change'. Nonetheless, the point is worth making that,
as this 'no change' discourse finds its way into debates about literacy standards, it
does itself have ideological significance and practical consequences, especially for
groups traditionally marginalized by educational practices.

In the light of the difficulties of establishing a 'slide', a case can be recon-
stituted in terms of a 'gap': the apparently increasing gap between the literacy
competences of many people and the genuine and proper demands that societies
are coming to place on those competences. That line of argument can now be
developed.

The Demands Hypothesis

The Demands Hypothesis states that, while literacy performance standards may
or may not have decreased, it is the social and cultural expectations of literacy
performance that have increased markedly in recent times. That is, society de-
mands increasing levels of literacy performance and the school system is
increasingly missing this moving target.

Useful summaries of the historical changes in literacy expectations over time
have been attempted by, for example, Graff (1986, 1987) and Resnick and Res-
nick (1977). As an example, Resnick and Resnick identified three major models
relating to literacy expectations evident in European history: the Protestant-
religious model, in which literacy skills were developed primarily for the memor-
ization of religious writing; the elite-technical model, which emphasized the use
of literacy for the development of theoretical knowledge and technical problem-
solving; and the civic-national model in which literacy was used primarily to
instil civic goals and national identity and pride, and which demanded under-
standing of familiar and routine textual material. Drawing upon historical policy
documents in the United States, Resnick and Resnick claimed that it is only
within the context of a growing civic-national model following the First World
War that the demand for understanding and the use of textual information in new
contexts developed. With reference to the USA, they claimed (p. 379) that to the
extent that people are disturbed about literacy levels it is because they are apply-
ing an inappropriately demanding criterion and construing the problem not in
that light but as less capable student performance. Compared with previous

generations, increasingly sophisticated pedagogical techniques are required before the goal of having all students and workers 'fully literate' in these comparatively new terms can be attained.

It is useful to identify two inflections of the Demands Hypothesis. First this hypothesis may be taken to mean that the functional demands on literacy performance have increased because individuals need to cope with increasingly complex bureaucracies and job specifications, both of which call upon increasingly complex and specialized forms of dealing with written texts. A second version of the hypothesis is that many societies are demanding or at least aspiring to a more culturally literate community than previously — a community that reads 'good literature', that perhaps writes in a greater diversity of written genres, and that can respond more sensitively to literary works.

With respect to first version of the Demands Hypothesis mentioned above, the civil-functioning aspect, the research of Mikulecky (1981) is pertinent. He examined the literacy demands placed upon industrial workers and high school students, concluding that technical workers faced more difficult job-related literacy demands than did students in technical schools; further that workers reported reading more for job-related tasks than did students for school-related tasks, with workers reading an average of 143 minutes per day compared to 98 minutes for high school students and 135 minutes for technical school students (pp. 408–409). Mikulecky also revealed that the workers read more difficult materials than did the students, with even blue collar manuals and directions averaging a Year 10 level of difficulty.

So the civil-functional Demands Hypothesis may not apply evenly across various levels of the work-force. That is, we would have expected in the past that white collar jobs as well as professional employment would necessarily entail Year 10 or better levels of literacy performance, but we might not have expected in the past that semi-skilled, unskilled or blue collar workers would necessarily face these demands. Similarly, the cultural version of the Demands Hypothesis has a social-class dimension: current notions concerning the benefits of literacy in terms of personal enrichment have led to pressure on teachers (of children and adults) to believe that all members of the community should appreciate literary works acceptable in the canon of the ruling culture, when the function of that canon is to set itself in contradistinction to mass culture. The ensuing community 'disappointment' becomes a public feature of class-reproductive discourse (Bourdieu, 1983).

The Demands Hypothesis is difficult to establish empirically over the short term. Resnick and Resnick and, in a less direct way, Eisenstein (1979) have documented literacy demands and expectations that have increased dramatically and changed in their nature over the centuries. But it has yet to be documented that the genuine demands on literacy practices, either in civil-functional or cultural terms, have shifted radically in the recent past. What may be more readily documented is the phenomenon that formal credentials for attaining jobs of various kinds in any given society have increased. A most common impression, at least in many Western nations, seems to be that many of the so-called unskilled jobs that lower school achievers formerly filled are disappearing or have come to require formally some enhanced literacy and numeracy competences, especially in urban centres. This is in part then a matter of credentialing, a different kind of explanation.