

# 1

## How to Read This Book and Why

David Jolliffe

This is a book of essays about communities, learning networks, and literacy. And in that sentence sit two chunks of terms that are necessary for potential readers—and we hope they are many, from a wide array of professional and personal walks of life—to preview before launching into the book.

First of all, to get a grasp of how to read it, consider that *Literacy as Conversation* is “a book of essays.” The two authors, Eli Goldblatt and David Jolliffe, have known each other for nearly three decades, and we ourselves have engaged in more hours of conversation about our work in community literacy than we can possibly count. Both of us have written articles, chapters, and books designed to be read primarily by our colleagues in departments of English, rhetoric, writing studies, and education; by graduate students—current or former—in those fields; and perhaps even by undergraduates interested in these areas. Our intention in *Literacy as Conversation* is not to exclude any of those readers but to expand our desired audiences beyond the boundaries of our previous works. We fervently hope that the book will be read not only by academics in higher education but also by teachers and administrators in K-12 schools, by school board members, by professionals in not-for-profit organiza-

tions that strive to influence quality-of-life issues, by government officials and policy makers who aim to effect positive changes in communities both rural and urban, and by “everyday folk” who share our interest in the ways reading, writing, and conversing can influence the empowerment and enrichment of citizens, now and in the future. We want all of these folks to resonate with the concept of literacy that we sketch out here and flesh out in the rest of the book.

With this hoped-for audience in mind, we consciously decided to write with more of a person-to-person approach than one typically finds in academic treatises. We have written what we call “honest-to-goodness essays”—so designated to contrast them with thesis-driven, argumentative, analytic academic articles. The noun *essay* comes from the French verb *essayer*, which means “to try”—not “prove” or “argue.” The great progenitor of the genre was the sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne, whose 107 wonderfully discursive and often rambling *essais* invite readers (and to an extent lead them) to forge conclusions, sometimes tentative ones, about the thorny subjects that occupied Montaigne’s mind: friendship, for example, or vanity, or lying, or sex, or aging. Montaigne’s essays allow the reader to participate in the mind’s *ongoing thinking*, not its completed *having thought*.

The essays in this book may not be completely open-ended, discursive essays in the mold of those written by Montaigne. But ours are certainly not essays like those school-based composition instruction has taught students to write for the past three centuries—texts with a quick “hook” for an introduction followed by a thesis statement that announces the piece’s central idea and then maps its development—a genre that generally shows itself in “grown-up” form in academic articles, chapters, and books. The essays in *Literacy as Conversation* fall somewhere between these two poles, but if we had to stake a spot on the continuum between them, I’d say we fall closer to Montaigne than to Sheridan Baker (1962) or Jane Schaffer (n.d.), two modern pedagogues who teach the glories of the sharply focused, thesis-driven academic essay—which in the Montaignian sense is not an essay at all but more of a *theme* or a *position paper*.

Three stylistic features emerge from our decision to write honest-to-goodness essays. First, we invite our readers to participate in the thinking, the rumination, and the conversations that have undergirded our work with community literacy, so our essays are shot through with the personal: anecdotes and narratives abound. Second, the first-person pronoun is unabashedly present. If you’re the kind of reader who is put off by discovering *I*, *me*, *we*, *us*, *my*, *mine*, *our*, and *ours* in a book published by an academic press, you might want to simply put *Literacy as Conversation* aside. We hope, however, that you’ll stay with us as we speak out of our own experiences. In that spirit,

we include a short chapter that enacts a conversation between the two of us because we want to emphasize that the book grew from hours of talk between us, talk with those we've worked with over the years, talk with colleagues and friends and our life partners. Third, we try hard to keep citations and references to a minimum. Those who know the literature on literacy will recognize ideas and theoretical orientations from many authors, but those coming to our book from other fields and endeavors should not be bothered by too much academic language (our reference to Montaigne aside). The introductory essay on definitions necessarily refers to other literacy scholars, and we do throw in an occasional footnote throughout, mostly to indicate places readers might explore if they are intrigued by one or another detail.

No doubt, the terms in our opening sentence that most strongly need unpacking come at the end of it: *communities*, *learning networks*, and *literacy*. These terms invite the question, "why should you read this book?"

*Literacy as Conversation* represents our collaborative effort to accomplish three goals. First, we show the fecund territory of community-based projects we have traveled for the past several years, in the hope that our readers might feel compelled to explore similar terrains and develop their own initiatives. Communities come in many sizes and shapes, and sometimes the people in them don't even recognize themselves as a social unit. In our experience, activities that bring people into collaboration can define a "community" for the participants. Second, we characterize the multivalent terms *communities*, *learning networks*, and *literacy* by showing how they are defined and fleshed out in two seemingly different but actually similar community contexts: urban North Philadelphia and largely rural Arkansas. Third, and above all else, we urge our readers to see the human energy, both individual and collective, that sits at the center of vibrant community literacy projects.

This energy is a hallmark of what we mean by literacy as conversation, a conceptualization that we introduce in the next two chapters and illustrate in the essays about Philadelphia and Arkansas that follow. To us literacy is more than tests and test scores, and we are frustrated by the discourse of many fields that insists on seeing it this way. Taking a cue from our friend Deborah Brandt, we see literacy as embedded in ongoing conversations that enable people to *do* things to make their worlds better (Brandt 2014). People want more than to succeed in school and get a decent (or better) job. They want to build relationships with their children and grandchildren by reading stories to them at night. They want to participate in their churches and their civic organizations. They want to help feed the hungry, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless. Literacy engages human beings in significant conversations that lead to *action*, involving them with the world of the word, connecting them to

intellectual resources sometimes called technology or theory, information or knowledge, insight or wisdom. These resources grow and morph as their users develop agility and flexibility with the world of words. Scholars and observers of our culture seldom see literacy as integral to the actions of people who want to solve problems. *Literacy as Conversation* aims to correct this shortsightedness.

The stories in this book focus on “ordinary people” growing the abilities to read, write, think, and converse while at the same time helping to improve the quality of life for themselves, their families, their neighbors. As these stories demonstrate, literacy learning doesn’t only happen in an official space like a school. We use the term *learning network* to name the web of public institutions, nonprofit organizations, and neighborhood centers that regularly sponsor activities in which people learn literacy through action and through human interaction, even if literacy is not the stated mission. We invite you to immerse yourself in these stories—to experience literacy as conversation.

# 2

## How to LEARN and What to Do about It

Eli Goldblatt

My wife and I taught in Temple University's Rome program during the fall 2013 semester. When we returned to Philadelphia after seven months of exploration and wonder, we were both more than a little lost. We each taught our classes and fulfilled our duties on campus, but so much of our minds were back in our beautiful and tumultuous temporary home, where we had lived near the Colosseum and taught around the corner from the Piazza del Popolo. In Rome I worked with Italian teacher Daniela Curioso to develop a program in which American college students visited English classes in an Italian high school named Liceo Statale Terenzio Mamiani once a week. Suddenly, in November, my students and I witnessed the Italian teens take over their school in protest against austerity cuts in the budget that had left their building in disrepair. Mamiani was a grand but neglected hulking pile that reminded me of unloved Philadelphia high schools built in the early twentieth century. It was great fun talking politics with Daniela and other Italian colleagues, who took the protest as a manifestation of normal political life, and my American students, who were aghast at the audacity and aggressiveness of youths otherwise well behaved by contemporary American standards of obe-

dience and decorum in class. But now I was home, and I wanted to bring that sense of active challenge to the static institutions in my region and that sense of inquisitiveness I had felt in Rome back to the American urban landscape I thought I knew so well. How was I to reengage with my own city now that I had been paid to spectate so deliciously far away?

The answer came in the early morning as I was coming out of a dream. In sleep I'd been gazing at the word *learn*, and I realized it could stand for Literacy Education Audit of Resources and Needs. A crazy, wonky thing to dream on a spring morning, but strangely it gave me hope. I realized that I was thinking in the wrong direction about initiatives I could start or people I could meet. Before I started anything, I needed to assemble two active lists: one naming the issues that were most pressing in Philadelphia neighborhoods related to literacy and a second enumerating all the organizations, churches, programs, and projects that could address those needs. Once I was fully awake and could scrutinize the gift of this insight, I saw that really I already knew many elements on both lists. Although I had often worked with academic programs and nonprofits on SWOT analyses—Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats—I had never taken the process so personally before. The dream shocked me into looking at agencies and urgencies right before my eyes. The dream challenged me to explore my own city anew, with humility, curiosity, and gratitude. Yes, the city had needs, but it also had a tremendous catalogue of resources.

When I told my friend David Jolliffe about my dream, he recognized his own version of LEARN in Arkansas. Since he had accepted the Brown Chair in Literacy at the University of Arkansas–Fayetteville in 2005, he had been developing literacy projects in the northwestern corner of the state as well as in the Delta, the eastern region that borders the Mississippi River and Tennessee beyond. On trips through the state with David, I'd witnessed him listening to residents about needs they wanted to address, and he regularly sought allies with whom to form productive coalitions. We had long talked about doing a book together that identified similarities and differences of literacy projects in our two environments—mine decidedly urban and his primarily rural. LEARN presented itself as a way to lay out comparisons and contrasts, to pose literacy not as a problem in need of solution but as an ongoing process of human communication, inquiry, advocacy, and collective identity that is always situated within systems, institutions, and polarities: public and private, nonprofit and business, educational and recreational, oppressive and liberating. Because our experiences have usually been with programs outside the grounds of traditional schools, we focus our book especially on sites of infor-

mal learning, or ways through which a great range of people develop literacy abilities in out-of-school and non-standardized activities.

LEARN isn't a formalized method, nor is it particularly new. It's asset mapping with a personal flavor, more DIY than Department of Education. I described something similar in my earlier book *Because We Live Here*, focusing on the links and disjunctions of writing instruction in schools, college programs, and nonprofit community centers in Philadelphia. But that was an earlier time in the city and in my career, when I still framed literacy primarily in terms of formal programs and certified instructors. For this book, we wanted to recognize and highlight the power of literacy learning where most people don't look for it—in gardens and art studios, theaters and local health clinics, any place where people are making and doing together. LEARN is meant to identify gaps and strengths in literacy education available to residents of all backgrounds and means. We use this acronym because—after years of watching programs succeed and fail, receive funding or wither for lack of resources—we want to rededicate ourselves to the basic insight that an activist or public educator needs to search out what's going on and what people want before designing “innovative” curricula and building pedagogical castles.

We also want to emphasize *learning* rather than *teaching* in our discussion of literacy. Each of us has taught for more than forty years, and we have a deep commitment to teachers and teachers in training. The name LEARN, however, adopts the verb that matters most in any educational environment. Our most potent influences have been educators who focused on *people learning while doing meaningful activities in group settings*: John Dewey and Paulo Freire, Ann Berthoff and Peter Elbow, David Bartholomae and Linda Flower, Keith Gilyard and Ellen Cushman, Elaine Richardson and Carmen Kynard. The purpose of this book is to make literacy learning outside of traditional classrooms more visible, from docent tours in museums and workshops in art centers to vocational training at work sites, health-care information campaigns, and gardens in vacant lots where immigrants raise vegetables they remember from home. We recognize that today people of all ages are learning about reading and writing, or learning about the world through symbol systems and codified knowledge, in ways that revise our old classroom image of second graders reading primers aloud in tracked groups called the Blue Birds or the Penguins.

We write this book in order to assemble a picture of literacy in action and movement for our two locations, with the hope that our efforts will model a more comprehensive understanding of any region's literacy health and poten-

tial. We chose Philadelphia and Arkansas simply because we know them best, and we trust that readers will LEARN about their own regions in their own ways. We have come to see that one promising outcome of LEARN is to identify and enhance what we call *learning networks of literacy sponsorship*. All too often, literacy learning happens in centers or programs isolated from other places where informal or formal learning can or does occur, and an explicit focus on networks can encourage cooperation and circulation that would increase the effectiveness of literacy experiences for all participants. Before we can describe networks that support literacy, however, we need to define what we mean by *literacy*.

### **What Is Literacy?**

We hope in this section to define *literacy* based on the New Literacy Studies orientation toward this human behavior as a “social practice”—embedded in interaction and purpose rather than frozen in rigid rules and specified skills. As David noted in the previous chapter, we also hope to describe literacy in a way that does not require readers to be scholars or educational experts. Despite the rise of literacy studies in anthropology, linguistics, and English in the 1960s and intense research on both reading and writing in education schools and composition and rhetoric programs in the last forty years, the term *literacy* still commonly conjures up elementary lessons in sounding out words and forming block letters. While literacy scholars discuss their subject with nuanced terminology, public debate searches for simple and direct ways to measure literacy rates and articulate standards in school and civic life. We need a way for researchers and policy makers to confer effectively.

UNESCO (2019) defines a “functionally literate” individual in a rather circular way: a “person who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community’s development.” This definition strikes us as having the virtue of recognizing that literacy is not only a quality associated with an individual but a range of functions and activities that connect individuals to their community. Still, we need a less bureaucratic-sounding definition, one reflecting people’s daily lives, to serve as a foundation for a discussion of literacy learning in urban and rural out-of-school environments.

Over the last twenty years, the US federal government has made an effort to measure and compare literacy rates in the American adult population. In 1992 the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) sponsored the National Adult Literacy Survey, and in 2003 NCES sponsored a second comprehensive measure of adult literacy called the National Assessment of Adult



Literacy. Both of these surveys asked participants in their homes “to spend approximately an hour responding to a series of diverse literacy tasks as well as questions about his or her demographic characteristics, educational background, reading practices, and other areas related to literacy” (Kirsch et al. 2002). Based on the results, participants were scored on three scales: prose, document, and quantitative literacies. The National Adult Literacy Survey surveyed more than thirteen thousand adults and the National Assessment of Adult Literacy surveyed more than nineteen thousand across the country and in state and federal prisons. Then in 2012–2014 NCES administered the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, an instrument that investigated “basic skills and the broad range of competencies of adults” in thirty-three countries (“What Is PIACC?” 2018). The program had four domains for assessment: literacy, numeracy, problem solving in technology-rich environments, and reading components. The program added the feature of testing participants on laptop computers, though it also offered a pencil-and-paper version for those unfamiliar with computers.

These broad standardized tests are useful in giving us some baseline information about relative rates of literacy. They are properly rooted in the recognition that literacy is complex, involves rhetorical knowledge about genre and audience, and requires cognitive abilities to solve problems embedded in everyday situations. Such testing also allows a relatively large sample size so that valid inferences might be drawn. Yet approaches based on standardized tests don’t help us understand the habits of mind that learners across age groups and ethnic identities most need to develop, nor do they suggest intrinsically rewarding activities that could motivate reluctant or alienated learners. We will have reason to refer to standardized tests such as the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, as well as others that reflect school performance, in our later discussion of the regions we studied. However, such tests alone don’t contribute to a definition of literacy as an intimate and all-encompassing element in the daily lives of everyone who works and plays, loves and strives in a culture founded on written symbol systems.

I have written elsewhere that literacy is generated within the dialectic between the group and the individual—on the one hand, the broad socialness of language habits, dialect, and national history and, on the other, the private intimacy of writing or reading alone or with a few like-minded friends and mentors (Goldblatt 2012, 243). This leads us to our working definition for *literacy: the ability to engage in a conversation carried on, framed by, or enriched through written symbols*. By *conversation* we mean everything from a passionate argument between friends in a bar, to a Twitter flurry after a public event, and to a leisurely exchange of information about parenting among

adults watching their kids at a neighborhood playground. We also mean written debates among microbiologists about experimental ethics, Instagram traffic among fashion enthusiasts over the latest celebrity creation, or sharp disagreements within a major league baseball coaching staff about who to send to the minor leagues. In whatever mode the conversation takes place, it is often sparked or tacitly provoked by some written text or at least touches on the participants' experience with newspapers and websites, manuals and guidebooks, statistical analyses, or fictional narratives. Sometimes conversations can be purposeful, suffused with emotion, or fraught with anxiety while other times chat can be meandering, speculative, or fanciful. And yet, within any given topic or situation—or what the Russian language theorist Mikhail Bakhtin calls “speech genres”—discussions of all types draw on past knowledge, cement shared attitudes, or challenge assumptions with new facts or perspectives. In a literate culture, these *conversations* contribute to the grand fabric of collective understandings.<sup>1</sup>

One consideration that drew us to the idea of conversation has to do with race and other social categories that often isolate or stigmatize specific populations. Both of us work in regions where race is a primary factor in the way civic resources are distributed, education is funded, and penalties for crime are meted out. Despite the fact that both Arkansas and Philadelphia have a significant black middle-class, a great many people of African descent are poor and experience unfair treatment from the justice and medical systems. Spanish speakers from a variety of Latin American countries, as well as immigrants from the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere, face similar barriers to their well-being that white citizens do not encounter. Fair treatment according to gender, sexual orientation, and disability all depend on freely available and truthful information as well as the cultural will to build an inclusive and just social system. Meaningful conversation across class and race, exchanges that persuade lawmakers and regional planners to prioritize the needs of marginalized people, can improve lives in so many communities. Literacy as conversation isn't just a pleasant metaphor. As David said in chapter 1, in our work

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1. Following Walter Ong, a great many scholars of literacy and language have noted the constant interaction between oral and written cultural practices. James Gee (1989), for example, goes so far as to privilege *Discourse* as a larger umbrella term within which literacy and other communicative behaviors fall. He famously defines *Discourses* as “identity kits”: “ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes and social identities as well as gestures, glances body positions, and clothes” (6–7). Two other influences we must mention are Kenneth Bruffee's (1984) link between ongoing human conversation and collaborative learning as well as James Britton's (1994) insistence on the interaction between speech and writing.

we have been particularly concerned with *conversations that enable people to do things to make their worlds better*. We believe that candid exchanges and explicit statements about oppression and neglect can be a crucial step toward greater social justice.

Other definitions of literacy may be more precise or technical, but this definition allows us to focus particularly on aspects of literacy we highlight throughout this book:

- Live and unfolding meanings emerge from webs of relationship
- Multiple conversations, characterized by specific purposes and contexts, generate distinctly different literacies
- Oral and interior utterances may be “literate” if they draw on knowledge or orientations associated with written texts.

We discuss each of these aspects in turn because they matter when we consider activities and groups outside of traditional schools. In this book, we investigate learning in non-school environments because we are convinced that much intrinsically motivated education goes on in theaters, clinics, gardens, art studios, and other places where people pursue activities they care about deeply. Especially for marginalized people in rural or urban areas who have not been well served by established agencies like school and social welfare systems, more creative means of drawing on community strengths can foster greater literacy gains and enhanced quality of life.

### **Live Meanings**

When people get together at family reunions, block parties, protest meetings, or funerals, they must make meaning out of complex social situations. People shed tears and laugh—sometimes simultaneously—but they walk away from a group event with some kind of conclusion about how they want their lives to be. Sometimes an event precipitates a major change, like a choice to stop drinking or a reengagement with an estranged relative, but more often than not such events simply reinforce old behaviors or steel participants to losses that come with age or bad weather or peremptory government decisions. Meanings emerge from interactions among characters we admire or like or disdain or avoid. A funeral may teach us something about cancer or environmental hazards, unfair economic conditions, or the strengths and weaknesses that emerge when people encounter tragedy. A protest meeting might form new alliances between aggrieved parties who did not know about their common complaints. A family reunion may reveal secrets and unrecognized histories to the young or inflame old feuds among elders. In every case, participants young and old confirm or expand their impressions of the group,

develop in subtle or blatant ways the connections that define their identities and make meaning in their lives. Too often, school—with its fill-in-the-blank lessons and arithmetic drills—isolates students from compelling events and cannot help them develop new insights or perspectives that might come out of direct experience with other people or current conditions.

David has written extensively about the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project he sponsored in a small eastern Arkansas town (2016). Helped by undergraduates from the University of Arkansas, high school students collected stories about life in their town before they were born. Similarly, students who attended the after-school program at Tree House Books (chapter 5) pursued a summer oral history project to collect stories about a barber shop half a block from their meeting place. At Don's Doo Shop, the owner, Don, did the hair of famous singers such as Michael Jackson and Jackie Wilson, who headlined around the corner at the Uptown Theater during the hall's heyday in 1950s and 1960s. In both cases, the interaction between written histories, oral storytelling, photo albums, and visits to historical sites produced for the young people a deeper and more convinced investment in the neighborhoods they thought they knew.

Perhaps the experience that first drew me to think about the unfolding nature of literacy took place in the little urban alternative high school where I taught in 1988–1989 (Goldblatt 1995, 92–93). A vibrant and playful fourteen-year-old whom I'll call Stephen Jones died suddenly that February. As far as anyone knew, neither gun violence nor drugs were involved; all at once he was simply gone. We announced the news the morning after Stephen died, and the entire school population of about a hundred kids went deathly silent. My senior English students felt they needed to do something, and two students in particular (I call them Maria and Tita in *'Round My Way* [1995]) decided they would devote all their energies that day to writing a memorial document. Maria and Tita received permission from the principal to skip their classes and work on the project instead. They went around to classrooms and collected written statements from middle and high school students who wished to contribute. They typed up the statements, edited and arranged the text in the primitive word-processing program the school used at the time, and passed out a two-page commemorative document to students by the end of the day. I noted in the book that “their goal was to produce a public representation of grief that could be used to substantiate the private emotional reality of the loss” (93). Now, from the distance of more than thirty years, I still remember the tremendous excitement and gratitude kids felt in receiving the memorial for Stephen, as well as the remarkable maturational moment it was for Maria and Tita to work on such a vital project for the community. The mysterious

loss of a child cannot be summed up or consoled away with high words, but a colloquy of grieving voices can affirm the continuity of life just when living seems most fragile. It took a suspension of academics as usual to respond to a reality too real for school.

### **Multiple Conversations**

If readers open volume 6, issue 6 of the journal *Mathematics*, they'll find an article on "Gray Codes" that "focuses on a Random Walk in a N-cube where a balanced Hamiltonian cycle has been removed" (Contassot-Vivier et al. 2018). A nonspecialist can decode every word of this sentence from the first paragraph but can only imagine a bicycle in a long-running Broadway show reported missing during somebody's accidental stroll around a block on N Street. A specialist may make a great deal out of the same sentence, but for perfectly understandable reasons most of us are left out of the conversation.

According to the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, a standard readability scale, "*New York Times* articles have a tenth-grade reading level" (FullMedia 2019). Yet a teenager needs considerable background knowledge about politics and union procedure, not to mention ideological clarity on questions about journalistic standards and biases, to appreciate a sentence like this one, printed on the *Times's* front page: "By a 5-to-4 vote, with the more conservative justices in the majority, the court ruled that government workers who choose not to join unions may not be required to help pay for collective bargaining" (Liptak 2018). Similarly, in an article on the relative chances of India beating England in an international cricket competition, author Ian Chappell (2018) comments that two "classic Cook double-centuries can't mask the fact that in his last 29 Test innings—a period of 12 months—he has had 19 scores under 20, including ten single-figure dismissals." Chappell's incisive prose won't enlighten the average baseball fan in Philadelphia or Little Rock. A reader misses thousands of conversations in the welter of published voices on any given day.

The phenomenon of multiple simultaneous conversations produces the common intuition that literacy comes in many flavors. We regularly talk about media, sports, financial, pop, civic, and nutritional literacies. Membership in an academic discipline or a sports fanbase depends first of all on being able to "talk the talk" in departmental meetings or local watering holes. At a minimum, graduate faculty subject their PhD candidates to qualifying exams to ensure their students don't embarrass their advisors at conference cocktail parties. No matter what their private principles, politicians running for office must speak the lingo of their region and demonstrate that they connect with the speech and conceptual framework of their core constituents, even when that speech may include racist "dog whistles" or idioms from certain ethnic

groups. Although differentiation by party and education level makes for factional solidarity and efficient stereotyping, this specialization by jargon and argot can also divide people who might share common causes or prevent an idea from contributing more widely to the common good. Indeed, this dynamic is what Bakhtin identified as the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies in language use: specialized functions spin words off into particular meanings while standardized conventions force language into rigid but roughly shared public discourse. Language proceeds in both directions at once, and literacy codifies and popularizes either tendency.<sup>2</sup>

Max Weinreich, sociolinguist and Yiddish scholar, once famously observed: “a language is a dialect with an army and a navy.” In the context of contemporary conversations that define literacy, both public and private languages are reinforced and shaped by publications, websites, billboards, and text messages. If the pen is mightier than the sword, literacy is more powerful than military armaments. But literacy isn’t cast in iron the way cannons are; the fluidity of words and conceptual orientations makes teaching writing and reading infinitely challenging. The navy can train a young recruit to pilot a battleship in a few months, but teaching a child to engage in multiple conversations necessarily takes years. A pilot needs standard procedures under specified conditions, while a speaker needs flexibility and imagination beyond a prescribed vocabulary. For this reason, we focus this book’s discussion on people acquiring literacy abilities through and within local practices like health care, gardening, theater, and other collective efforts that require language learning in action.

### **Oral and Interior Utterance**

Sadly, few pure oral cultures exist on the planet anymore. Yet habits associated with “orality” by the scholar Walter Ong in his landmark study *Orality and Literacy* persist today within our hyperliterate Western culture. We tell each other stories about family or friends that don’t come from books or articles or even websites; one could make the argument that social media, with all its speedy texts and pictures, binds us to a chain of “he said, she said” that has

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2. Researchers and theorists interested in the interaction of multiple languages, or what has become known as *translingualism*, have noted that, even though non-native English speakers are often dismissed or demeaned in American culture, multilingual speakers bring rich resources to communication. For example, Alyssa Cavazos (2016) has investigated the oral and written practices of multilingual university faculty. She notes that one of her participants, a professor she names Martinez, emphasizes the power of “platica” or conversation “as a strategy he enacts to negotiate his knowledge of different language practices” (8).

an uncanny likeness to the dynamics in a tiny village that make it susceptible to momentary panics and scandals. And yet, as Ong noted in his work, “we have interiorized the technology of writing so deeply that without tremendous effort we cannot separate it from ourselves or even recognize its presence and influence” (Cushman et al. 19). We are fish who cannot understand water.

Our public and private dialogues and monologues, shaped and framed by the written word, go far beyond what we say to our neighbors over the fence or in the bowling alley. We speak to ourselves in times of stress, elation, reverence, and anger out of the playbooks and prayer books of our intimate acquaintance. My childhood reading encompassed Tom Swift and the Hardy Boys, a patchwork of Jewish liturgies, and the box scores of bad Washington Senators teams; David started as a Methodist, sings now with his Episcopal choir, and he followed the Pirates from his home in West Virginia. Because David has appeared in or directed a myriad of Renaissance and modern plays, he frequently quotes from dramatic works, while I tend to reference twentieth-century American poetry because I write poems out of that tradition. Our literate experience not only shapes what we say in formal and casual daily speech but informs our dreams and yearnings, our moral inclinations and political persuasions. Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky argued that children internalize the speech they hear from the older folks around them. In a literate world, we are always internalizing the discourse we encounter, even if we choose to pattern ourselves after some speakers and writers more than others as we come into greater command of our influences. Then, of course, there are the silly melodies and rhymes that stick in our heads for no apparent reason. (Who would *wish* to hear “God didn’t make little green apples” on repeat in the brain if the execrable little earworm weren’t so tenacious?) Obsessive humming is the price of a literate mental life.

But Vygotsky and others Russian cognitive researchers in the 1920s and 1930s also thought about thought outside the brain. Following their line of investigation, various conceptual camps have grown up and become especially influential in the development of artificial intelligence and human-computer interactions. Philosophers of mind and cognitive scientists such as Andy Clark (2008) investigate *externalized* mental function, expanding and amplifying human consciousness through computational and compositional tools as varied as pen and paper, laptops, and virtual reality. This echoes Ong’s emphasis on writing as a technology, but the analysis now goes much further. Proponents of the “extended mind,” says Clark, “paint mind itself (or better, the physical machinery that realizes some of our cognitive processes and mental states) as, under humanly attainable conditions, extending beyond the bounds of skin and skull” (76). Clark refers to this as “the suggestion that *mind it-*

*self* leaches into body and world” (30) through our machines, our physical alterations in the environment, and language or symbol systems that can be handed down over time. Clark’s work grows out of the concept of “distributed cognition,” a way of describing thinking not as confined to a brain that must make its own representations of every outside object the individual wishes to manipulate, but instead the individual embedded in a culture depends on artifacts and social knowledge to amplify the power of the brain. The sailor at the helm of an aircraft carrier, for example, only needs to know certain protocols and procedures to call on the vast amount of cognition built into the hardware of the ship. The human mind, as Clark characterizes it, “emerges at the productive interface of brain, body, and social and material world” (219). Thus Clark poses individual biological, mental, and emotional life as always in relationship to the larger outside world, both physically and culturally.

In the same way, researchers in our field of composition and rhetoric recognize that writing and reading facilitate connections. The literacy of individuals takes place within larger institutional and cultural settings, which enable meaningful contributions but can also hinder greater accomplishments.<sup>3</sup> For example, Sue Doe and her colleagues (2011) use daily logs kept by nontenured faculty from many different academic departments to understand the contributions and tribulations of nontenured instructors, who serve their students and their profession without the high status and rewards of their tenured colleagues. Doe and her coauthors establish the richness of their subjects’ teaching while also highlighting their marginalization from crucial aspects of academic life. In a remark that resonates with our definition of literacy, they say that the purpose of their study is to provide “context for purposeful cross-disciplinary conversations” (433) that could improve the overall effectiveness of higher education and help educators “understand how we might work together to bring about a more equitable workplace” (447). In this case, the conversation informed by literate practice could underwrite significant change.

We mention this embodied orientation toward extending minds because we too envision education aimed at involving learners of all ages in the construction of the society they belong to. We hope in the following chapters to focus particularly on instances when learners encounter literacy experiences rooted in social connection, inventive activities, and goals that do not depend on grades or abstract rewards for motivation. We turn now to a consideration

3. The distributed cognition approach composition and rhetoric colleagues often take is called activity theory (see Bazerman and Russell 2003). Also arising out of early twentieth-century Russian research, activity theory is a way of portraying the complex social context for any person’s effort to accomplish a goal.



of the organizations and institutions most likely to support such informal learning environments.

### **Learning Networks**

The idea of a “learning network of literacy sponsorship”—or “learning network” for short—is based first of all on Deborah Brandt’s (2001, 19) often cited definition of literacy sponsorship: “Any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach and model as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way.” For Brandt, increasingly sophisticated uses of reading and writing must always be cultivated and supported by mentors, teachers, agencies, organizations, or social groups. Advances that any individual makes in literacy practices are thus shaped by the goals and self-interests of these sponsors. Literacy sponsors are not always beneficent, however. They sponsor with a particular attitude or agenda, and these preconceived or unexamined orientations can lead to obstructing some sorts of learning, just as they may encourage cognitive gains in other areas. The most common example might be the institutionalized sexism that long discouraged women and girls from studying math and science or the institutionalized racism that made higher education less accessible to African Americans students. Brandt’s insights have been elaborated and debated by many other researchers since *Literacy in American Lives* was published in 2001 (see Duffy et al. 2014 for a wide-ranging discussion of the influence of that book). We take it as indisputable that the literacy health of any community depends in large part on effective and empowering literacy sponsorship for adults and children.

Another element of our understanding of networked sponsors comes from my earlier and differently oriented use of the term *sponsor*. In *’Round My Way* (1995, 25), I focus on “authority” as a quality developed by a writer through identification with more or less powerful social institutions: “a writer’s authority in a society depends in large part upon the power and influence of the institution that sponsors that writer’s authorship.” An English major may learn about literature from an inspired and inspiring college teacher as a sponsor, but the influence and reputation of Literature as an object of study casts its institutional authority over the genres the student chooses to write within or the topics she chooses to write about. As English departments have fallen in prestige over the last fifteen or twenty years—reflected in the lack of academic jobs and the shrinking resources for publishing literary and critical works—the critic or novelist has become less visible as an influential intellectual figure in the American cultural mainstream. National and international prizes lend

a certain juice to individual authors, but publishing in traditional genres such as poetry or fiction may not earn them much general respect, depending on the reputation of their publishing houses.

Certain authors write for sponsoring institutions rooted in dominant culture, such as literary presses or news agency websites or academic journals, but sponsoring institutions might also be rooted in nondominant cultures, such as storefront churches or neighborhood newsletters or comedy clubs in downtown bars. A writer gains *authority*, the ability to act as an author, through the backing of a more or less powerful sponsor (41). The poet laureate consultant for the Library of Congress may or may not be a “better” poet than one who publishes in a small South Jersey literary magazine, but the poet laureate draws on tradition, prestige, and access to media that a writer with more modest backing cannot match. Of course, institutional sponsorship isn’t simple to analyze or easy to evaluate. The political ramifications of sponsorship become starker if we imagine an author publishing an editorial on the Black Lives Matter movement in a national venue such as the *Wall Street Journal*, a local online media site like the *Ferguson News*, or an African American–oriented news service like *The Root*. In each case, the relationship with larger and smaller audiences is crucial, as well as the perceived status and social agenda of the author. Influence can vary with the nature, history, and reach of the publication, but particularly in the relatively nonhierarchical environment of social media, a powerful message can spread without the blessings of the *New York Times* or an appearance on Fox News.

In short, where Brandt looks at the effects sponsors have on individuals at a particular moment in history, I emphasize the function and influence of social institutions themselves. Both individual and institutional orientations toward sponsorship enable us to see literacy learning as more than a matter of effective or ineffective instruction. Through these lenses we can see the dimensionality and connectivity involved in any person’s growing facility with reading and writing, and we can recognize how much humans need trust, identity, and a sense of belonging to thrive as producers and interpreters of language. Unequal access to powerful sponsors and influential institutions leads to inequities in literacy broadly. Returning to our definition, those without the right sponsors or sponsoring institutions are often barred from the most crucial and politically effective *conversations* in society.

The shifting interplay between individual and institution provides a fascinating ground for investigation but also a rich base for organizing and educational activism. Both Philadelphia and Arkansas are places where access to quality education, public services, and housing are heavily affected by race and other social factors. The aggregates we call or imagine as *networks* intersect

and intermingle at times, offering moments when individuals can cross barriers and groups can form new alliances.<sup>4</sup> For example, in chapter 7 I describe an African American church in far South Philly that leases a large plot of land nearly for free to a horticulture nonprofit that organizes urban farming for church members and immigrants from Africa and Asia who have moved into the neighborhood. Farmers at Growing Together Garden raise crops alongside one another and thus develop friendships or alliances that would otherwise never have formed. Networks can also coalesce around themes or special interests. A theater group in northwestern Arkansas that David discusses in Chapter 9 has developed fluency and public advocacy among Latinx youth while also entertaining, enlightening, and challenging white audiences about issues in the region they may not have recognized otherwise.

For the moment, I'll set aside the more official sponsors of literacy such as schools, colleges, and universities. These are obvious examples, but for reasons we will touch on later, the most recognizable literacy sponsors are not necessarily the most effective. In urban environments almost anywhere in the United States (and to some extent in rural regions as well), sponsors classified by the nature of their primary expertise or focus might include

- Language support for immigrants
- Language training for English speakers looking to travel outside the United States
- Central libraries and their branches, bookstores, and literary centers
- Out-of-school-time resources for children and youth
- Job training, adult basic education, degree completion support for adults
- Museums for adults and children, historical landmarks and plaques
- Prisons, jails, youth detention centers, courts
- Police, fire, license and inspection, public transportation, other services and utilities
- Day-care facilities for seniors
- Community arts organizations focused on special populations, neighborhoods, or particular media such as ceramics or mural painting
- Print, video, and multimedia production
- Churches, mosques, synagogues, and other religious institutions

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4. Network theory involves a complex literature ranging from mathematics to sociology to computer science. Sponsors of literacy can be framed with this same approach, but we do not have the space or the inclination here to account for the intellectual connections. We leave it to readers who care to follow up on network theory (see Dorogovtsev and Mendes 2003).

- Grass roots political groups such as town watch organizations, party ward leadership, neighborhood and business associations
- Recreation centers and parks, arboreta and public gardens
- Hospitals, clinics, urgent-care centers, and health outreach facilities
- Food distribution, cooperatives and supermarkets, nutrition information outlets
- Sources of information on housing involving access, safety, affordability, and financing, such as realtors and homeowner associations
- Banks, credit unions, insurance agencies, check cashing shops, and other financial institutions
- Sources of information on transportation
- Sports facilities and training programs.

Agencies, organizations, institutions, and companies focusing on these themes may or may not be publicly recognized as fostering literacy. They may not include literacy in their mission statements. Nevertheless, in the broader (yet more specialized) sense of literacy found in Brandt's work, all these categories include crucial sponsorship for developing citizens' (and noncitizens') ability to address and advocate for their own needs as well as enhancing the mobility of individuals across activities, jobs, and career trajectories (see Wan's helpful work on literacy and citizenship [2014]). Institutions of all sizes and descriptions sponsor the authority of participants and learners to create artwork, construct gardens, design websites, or make decisions about their own health—in short, to be the authors of their own realities. Thus, interconnected literacy sponsors, or learning networks, may serve to enhance or restrict movement across barriers associated with class, race, and other socially constructed identities (see Horner and Bawarshi 2020).

No single researcher could track all of the above categories. In the chapters on resources in our respective regions, we consider examples of complex public, nonprofit, and private learning networks in a large city as well as a rural and semirural state. In Philadelphia, I focus on after-school literacy centers, community arts organizations, and urban farms. David discusses work he's done with a health system, theater groups, and a grassroots Latino youth organization. We're particularly interested in the power and problems associated with the blurring of formal and informal learning that takes place in sponsorships not directly associated with schools. As Shirley Brice Heath and Brian Street remark on the efficacy of this blurring: "We often forget, in the face of the dichotomy of *formal/informal*, how retrieval of random information collected through casual exposure is quickly activated by a current real need" (2008, 75). The urgency of "current real need" makes informal, non-school

sponsorship more compelling in neighborhoods where civic sponsors such as schools or the police are regarded with wariness if not downright hostility. Official authorities—teachers, principals, police, and politicians—all too often seem to privilege the ways and needs of powerful people and institutions outside the local community.

To point toward one striking and complicated example, I'll discuss in chapter 5 a small nonprofit called Tree House Books. Tree House illustrates what we mean about the power and limitation of a single agency's literacy sponsorship within a stressed community. This little organization stands in the shadow of a much larger nonprofit, Temple University, and their difference in size and resources is not all to the disadvantage of Tree House. One major obstacle toward cooperative efforts between the people of North Philadelphia and the university is that Temple so profoundly represents established power and codified knowledge. Well-meaning college students who plant a garden with kids in a North Philadelphia recreation center through a horticulture class can make connections with neighbors, but local adults may be wary about whether the university has designs on that property even if no administrator is involved. The informal feel of a nonprofit program unaffiliated with official literacy authorities allows for a less guarded focus for participants. This is an instance in which the social power of a large institution does not necessarily make it the best sponsor for certain types of literacy authority. In a smaller organization more attuned to the lives of the participants, learners' immediate experience and overriding concerns motivate the activities, rather than what they "should" know according to a standardized test or qualifying exam.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, a small organization must always struggle for funding, program leadership, and other tangible and intangible resources. It's a major accomplishment even to survive and continue serving the target population each year. Tree House isn't a poster child or a cautionary tale for small-scale literacy sponsorship; few nonprofits are purely unalloyed successes or illuminating failures. It is, however, an organization I have learned a great deal from and still care a great deal about. The Tree House origin story on its own may have value for readers, and in a broader perspective its survival through more than fifteen years of existential crises have lessons for us about the value and promise of literacy sponsors in a learning network.

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5. Jabari Mahiri has been publishing in this area since at least 1991. See for example his 1998 book, *Shooting for Excellence*, and his 2004 edited collection, *What They Don't Learn in School*. He has been especially strong on sports and urban youth.