

Literacy as Threshold Concept: Building Multiliterate Awareness in First-Year Writing

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The contextual nature of literacy is a threshold concept that one must move through to better understand composition as a discipline. A nuanced understanding of this concept enables students to critique dominant literacy ideologies and appreciate the diverse literacies present in everyday life. The literacy narrative, a genre that sometimes reinforces reductionist views of literacy, can push students to move through this threshold concept when students are encouraged to think beyond reading and writing in their essays. This article presents the results of a quantitative and qualitative study of 111 first-year writing students' literacy narratives, composed in response to a multiliteracies-focused prompt. Students indicated their developing understanding of literacy's context-boundedness in the diverse topics they chose, the definitions of literacy present in their narratives, and their overall rejection of the "literacy myth." These results are reinforced by interviews with students about their experiences writing their literacy narratives.

The word "literacy" is one of the most evocative and contested terms not only in writing studies, but in the culture at large. In popular discourse, literacy is a core value that is constantly under attack. This mindset is illustrated in a 2018 *Newsweek* editorial by Newt Gingrich and Gerard Robinson, which warns that inadequate standardized test scores in reading and math should make Americans "ashamed of how we are condemning our children to a future of economic insecurity and social decay." Those of us who teach writing know that this rhetoric is nothing new. From the 1874 emergence of composition studies as a "response to the poor writing of upperclassmen" (Rose 342), to the publication of *Why Johnny Can't Read* in 1955, to our contemporary concerns about texting leading to the downfall of writing standards, each generation has been characterized by its own perceived literacy crisis.

Bronwyn Williams argues that this crisis mentality stems in part from the public's incomplete understanding of what literacy has come to mean. A term that once referred to the basic ability to read and write has evolved with the culture's needs and values. The rise of the New Literacy Studies movement in the 1980s and works such as Shirley Brice Heath's *Ways with Words* called for a more inclusive understanding of literacy that includes a range of practices related to orality and performativity. In 1989, James Paul Gee defined literacy

as mastery of the values, communication, and ways of being of a community, and noted that this does not need to involve print (7-9). More recently, scholarship on digital writing and multimodality has expanded our understanding of literacy even more. This understanding allows us to see the complex literacies of populations “in crisis,” meaning that instructors do not need to “scare [students] with tales of the literacy crisis of their generation but instead teach them how to understand how language, culture, and identity work together” (Williams 181).

As our definition of literacy has moved further from the public perception that literacy is simply the ability to read and write, this relationship between literacy and context has become a threshold concept for composition studies. Jan Meyer and Ray Land define threshold concepts as “‘conceptual gateways’ or ‘portals’ that lead to a previously inaccessible, and initially perhaps ‘troublesome,’ way of thinking about something” (373). These threshold concepts are often key to understanding a field of study, and crossing these thresholds enables “a transformed internal view of subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view” (373). The idea of threshold concepts has been used to frame many of the key tenets of writing studies, most notably in Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s collection *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts in Writing Studies*. To their list I would add the concept that the definition of literacy is dependent on context. Thinking of literacy as something beyond decontextualized reading and writing skills is certainly troublesome for many students who have had the importance of print-based literacy instilled in them since childhood. Furthermore, understanding the social and contextual embeddedness of literacy brings about a new and more thorough understanding of composition as a discipline and the world at large, as it allows us to see the complex literacies embedded in all communities.

Students can begin to understand the threshold concept of literacy’s dependence on context by examining their own histories in literacy narratives. The literacy narrative is, traditionally, a short autobiographical essay describing the author’s development in reading and writing. Many versions of this assignment ask students to consider the impact their cultural context has on their literacy (Beaufort; Wardle and Downs) and encourage students to interrogate myths that reinforce literacy as a static construct (DeRosa). For example, the literacy narrative prompt included in Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs’s *Writing about Writing* reader includes a series of questions for students to consider as they write, including, “What are some institutions and experiences in your life that have acted as literacy sponsors?” (263).

However, the narratives students produce often reinforce common cultural narratives related to literacy. In her analysis of sixty students’ literacy narratives, Kara Poe Alexander found that all but one enacted what she calls the “literacy-

equals-success master narrative” (“Successes” 608). Similar to Harvey J. Graff’s “literacy myth” (xvi), this master narrative positions literacy acquisition as a necessary step toward achieving economic success. This fails to recognize the complex roles literacy plays in different contexts, as well as the power structures embedded in and reinforced by academic literacy (“Successes” 616).

The fact that this belief shows up in student writing is perhaps unsurprising. As Alexander acknowledges, students’ understanding of literacy is shaped by a larger culture that portrays literacy (meaning the ability to read and write) as unquestioningly positive and uplifting. This idea can be reinforced by the readings instructors assign to prepare students to write their narratives. Literacy narratives like Malcolm X’s “Learning to Read” (included in Wardle and Downs’s literacies unit and quoted in their previously-referenced literacy narrative prompt) and George Orwell’s “Why I Write” (included in Anne Beaufort’s literacy narrative unit plan in *College Writing and Beyond*) portray literacy as liberating and even life-saving. When we are socialized into this belief, it is difficult to recognize that print-based literacy is not enough to guarantee one’s success or even survival. It is even more difficult to recognize how judgments of literacy can serve as fronts for racism, classism, and sexism, and that different individuals and groups possess their own unique literacies that may go undetected in academic settings.

The literacy narrative, when properly framed, can help students understand the relationship between literacy and context by encouraging them to engage with the cultural and community forces that influence their literacy development. Some instructors encourage this engagement by asking students to use their alternative literacies to produce multimodal literacy narratives (Chandler and Scenters-Zapico). However, the same understanding can be achieved with a print-based personal narrative. The key is for literacy narrative assignments to emphasize the threshold concept that the definition of literacy is context-dependent. This threshold concept challenges the academy’s position as the ultimate judge of literacy, broadens the range of practices that can be considered “literate,” and moves students closer to a deepened understanding of literacy.

Yet, focusing students’ attention on the relationship between literacy and communities may not be enough to move students across the threshold to a more contextual understanding of literacy. This was the case when I taught a version of Beaufort’s literacy autobiography assignment as a new teacher. This assignment asks students to:

. . . Consider [your] discourse communities . . . Analyze how those discourse communities have shaped you as a writer and analyze your writing rituals . . . in order to gain greater insight into the things

that have influenced your development as a reader/writer. (*College Writing* 190)

While this assignment encourages students to contextualize their literacy development, many of my students chose to focus on their academic communities and reproduce versions of Alexander's "literacy-equals-success" narrative.

The issue as I saw it had to do with the assignment's explicit focus on reading and writing. The literacy narrative prompts presented in both *College Writing and Beyond* and *Writing about Writing* ask students to include the events that shaped them as readers and writers. Wardle and Downs's prompt, for instance, includes specific instructions to begin by "considering your history as a reader and writer" (262). For many students, these early memories are school-centered and include at least some degree of success, evidenced by their presence in a college writing class. When I specifically encouraged students to write about a wider range of literacies (including, as Gee specifies, those that do not involve print), students took the opportunity to define literacy for themselves, showing more critical thinking than I had previously observed in the assignment. Moreover, their narratives, for the most part, did not equate academic literacy with economic success.

Here, I examine how students used their literacy narratives to interrogate the nature of literacy in their own communities. In a study examining eleven sections of introductory composition, I show how giving students space to write about a range of literacies can help them grapple with a new understanding of literacy and approach the threshold concept that literacy's definition changes with cultural context. By engaging with the complexities of their own literacy practices, students can begin to approach the complexities of literacy's role in their lives and in the larger society.

Methodology

This study uses data from a larger project that took place during the fall 2015 semester at a large public research university in the Midwest. I studied work from 111 students enrolled in "Introduction to Composition," the first of two courses in the English department's first-year writing (FYW) sequence. These students were enrolled across eleven sections taught by six instructors, including myself. While I did not control for age, gender, ethnicity, or other demographic factors (opting instead for the largest possible sample), my interactions with the students and instructors suggest that almost all participants were young adults, typically in their first semester of college.¹

Each instructor taught a unit with a combined focus on the literacy narrative and multiliteracies. I provided each instructor with a unit schedule, homework assignments, and lesson plans along with the assignment prompt for

the literacy narrative project.² Students worked with several texts that push the limits of literacy, including Gloria Anzaldúa's "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" and Tony Mirabelli's exploration of the literacies in food service work. Students also explored the literacies embedded in different cultural groups through a short assignment based on the BBC documentary series *Stephen Fry in America*.

The literacy narrative prompt gave students the option to focus either on academic literacy or an alternative literacy. Those who chose to write about alternative literacies were instructed to "think about how [they] learned the 'unwritten rules' of a certain community, subculture, skill, or activity" and explain how their topic can be considered a literacy. Adapting some of Beaufort's language, the prompt also stated that one of the assignment purposes was to prompt all students to "examine [themselves] as a reader and writer of texts (written or otherwise) in multiple contexts." My hope was that the addition of "written or otherwise" would encourage students to look beyond printed texts to the social aspects of literacy, even if writing about academic experiences. I also encouraged this by including an opening epigraph from Anne Ruggles Gere: "...literacy means joining a specific community through understanding the issues it considers important and developing the capacity to participate in conversations about those issues" (120).

As part of my larger study, I examined student work across all participating sections, conducted classroom observations of each instructor, and interviewed all instructors and five randomly selected students.³ Here, I focus specifically on students' written literacy narratives and oral interviews. My study corpus included 111 student narratives.⁴ I used QSR's NVivo program to sort narratives according to topic and to isolate and sort passages of interest in students' writing.⁵ I also rhetorically analyzed each narrative (described below in the appropriate sections). In the following discussion, I use insights gained through these quantitative and qualitative methods to demonstrate how students' definitions and discussions of literacy showed them grappling with the threshold concept that literacies are plural and context-bound.

Multiliteracies in Students' Topic Selections

One way students showed an awareness of literacy's dependence on context was through the topics they selected for their narratives. Participants submitted projects focusing on a wide variety of subjects, including sports, Greek life, and military service. To get a sense of the range of topics, I classified each narrative according to theme. In an initial pass through the corpus, I made note of commonly occurring topics. Then, using NVivo, I created categories for each topic and tagged each narrative accordingly. Those that did not fit a topic category were first tagged as *other*. Finally, I repeated this process with only the *other* category, creating a separate category for any topic that

occurred five times or more. Eight categories emerged. Each category is described in table 1.

Table 1
Multiliteracies in Student Narratives

Topic Category	Number of Papers	Percentage of Corpus	Examples (Essay Titles)
LITERACY OF SPORT Describes the literacies involved in playing a sport, often as part of a high school or college team (counted separately from literacy of a subculture due to the topic's popularity).	25	22.5%	"The Complicated Etiquette of Softball"
READING, WRITING, AND ACADEMIC LITERACY Corresponds most closely to the "traditional" literacy narrative. Describes the author's experience learning to read and/or write and typically focuses on school experiences.	19	17.1%	"Learning to Read and Write"
RELATIONSHIP LITERACY Describes the author's experience learning the literacies involved in maintaining interpersonal relationships, including romantic relationships and friendships.	16	14.4%	"Early Lesson about Lying for a 5 Year Old Boy"
LITERACY OF A SUBCULTURE Relates the author's literacy development in a subculture, such as a fan community, Greek organization, or religious community.	13	11.7%	"Joining a Fraternity"
OCCUPATIONAL LITERACY Describes the author's experience learning the literacies of a job they've held.	11	10%	"Working at a Pharmacy"
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE Centers on either the process of learning a new language and/or culture (often, international students moving to the United States or U.S.-born students travelling abroad) or the process of learning slang terms or specialized terminology in one's native language.	9	8%	"English" (about learning English as a second language)
ARTISTIC LITERACY Describes the author's development in an artistic pursuit such as music or graphic design.	6	5.4%	"Animation Communication"
LITERACY OF A NEW SCHOOL Describes the author's experience learning the values and "unwritten rules" of a new school. Unlike academic literacy narratives, these center on the social and cultural dimensions of adjusting to a new school.	5	4.5%	"Here Come the Nuns" (about attending a Catholic high school)
OTHER Narratives that did not have a clear theme or centered on a theme found in fewer than five narratives.	7	6.3%	"A Life Changing Experience" (about the author learning to manage her epilepsy)
	111	100%	

When looking at the literacies students chose to describe, academic literacy is positioned as one of several literacies up for discussion and is not given a privileged position. In fact, most students chose not to focus their narratives on their experiences with academic literacy. Though “reading, writing, and academic literacy” is the second most popular single topic, combining the non-school-focused topics (separating the topics based on whether they focus on academic literacy) shows that 92 of the 111 narratives (roughly 83%) do not center on academic literacy. This shows that students are situating literacy in contexts other than the school system, which indicates that they are developing an awareness of the contextual nature of literacy. Even when combining the “language and culture” category with the academic literacy category, eighty-three narratives (roughly 75%) do not place sole (or, in some cases, even primary) focus on reading, writing, or verbal language.

Most narratives position reading and writing as part of an array of behaviors and practices that the author had to master to become literate in a specific context. For example, Courtney explains that to become literate in serving at the local Mexican restaurant where she was employed, she had to “learn the menu, learn to read the customer and learn how to manage [her] time so that [her] customers are always happy.” Only one of these skills, learning the menu, involves reading a printed text. The others require knowledge of a complex range of constructs and behaviors including verbal communication, social cues, and self-regulation. In Courtney’s narrative, the processes of reading and writing are discussed alongside the interpersonal and bodily aspects of her literacy as a restaurant server. Facility with print is just one of several skills needed to become successful or “literate” in this context.

Similarly, Stacey draws an extended analogy in her interview between working as a barista at a campus coffee shop (the focus of her narrative) and learning a language. As described in her narrative, gaining literacy in this environment involves learning the unique names for the prepared drinks (many of which reference campus buildings and traditions, which a literate barista would need to understand), the processes for making these drinks, and the abbreviations different employees use for the drinks. It also involves mastering the process of “translating” the customer’s order and making the drink, a process she compares to dialect development in her interview:

... each of these people who are working in the stores were taught by different people, and so that’s kind of how a dialect for a language works, too. They’re taught different languages by other people ... learning how to be a barista [is] a giant allegory for . . . learning the language, since ... how you grew up is where you were trained and how you were trained. And so, I mean, we do have an official guide-

book ... Sort of a dictionary and set of rules ... but oftentimes we don't actually follow it and just go with what's instinctively natural for us.

With this analogy, Stacey explains that complex language-learning processes occur in settings that can go unrecognized in the school system and in some academic discussions of literacy. While her understanding of dialect development may be incomplete, she shows an awareness of the contextual nature of literacy and argues for the complexity and legitimacy of alternative literacies, both in terms of dialect and in the embodied literacies required of baristas. For a first-year student whose only college English experience is introductory composition, this is a fairly advanced analysis of the literacy of barista work.

Exposure to multiliteracies led even the students who wrote about academic literacy to explain what, beyond reading and writing, they had to learn to be academically literate. For instance, several writers described how knowledge of their learning disabilities enabled them to become literate by their schools' standards. Another student, Martha, explains in her narrative how writing a successful college paper involves more than the skill of putting words on a page:

Now that I'm in college, I realized that being literate in writing is knowing what you have to talk about. When we are handed essays for class, yes we are given a prompt we must talk about, but I also know that most professors want you to write to what they want to hear rather than what you want to talk about ...

Though most of her narrative focuses on reading and writing, Martha does seem to have a developing awareness that academic literacy extends beyond these skills. Moreover, her use of the phrase "literate in writing" positions writing as one among a range of literacies. To her, the word "literate" does not imply knowledge of reading or writing; literacy is contextual, and the context must therefore be identified. Again, her understanding of academic literacy is not perfect—most professors would likely quibble with her assertion that they want students to write what they want to hear—but this passage shows that she is working her way through the threshold concept of literacy as a contextually bound social practice. Students' progress toward this threshold concept is perhaps even more apparent when they offer their own definitions of literacy.

Definitions of Literacy in Student Narratives

As noted earlier, I asked students in the literacy narrative prompt to explain or illustrate how their topic can be considered a literacy. While a definition of literacy is not typically a convention of the literacy narrative genre, some writers chose to define the term explicitly within their narratives. These defi-

nitions provide arguably the clearest insight into how students framed their own understanding of literacy and how this knowledge developed. In my first reading of the corpus, I sorted the narratives into two categories based on whether they explicitly defined literacy. Using NVivo, I then isolated the definitions present in the thirty-four papers that did offer an explicit definition. Finally, I sorted the definitions according to content. For the sake of comprehensiveness, I placed definitions into multiple categories where appropriate. Four major themes emerged and are described in table 2.

Table 2
Definitions of Literacy by Theme

Theme	Description	Occurrences	Example
LITERACY AS COMMUNITY PRACTICE	The author attempts to define literacy solely within the context of a specific community or provides a general definition that specifies that literacy must be considered within communities.	25 occurrences, 20 papers ⁶	David: "In order to be considered a literate member of the United States Army there are fundamentals for addressing a superior or subordinate soldier, specific terminology and acronyms used on a day to day basis, and proper customs and courtesies of the Army."
LITERACY AS "READING AND WRITING PLUS"	Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write, plus some other ability, definition, or restriction.	15 occurrences, 12 papers	Courtney: "A few weeks ago if you asked me to define the word 'literacy' I would tell you that it is having the ability to read and write. While this is true there is more to that word than I thought. Because of this unit I was able to learn that literacy is also having knowledge in a specific area."
LITERACY AS COMMUNICATION	These definitions emphasize the communicative aspects of literacy.	14 occurrences, 12 papers	Luke: "Soccer literacy is . . . being able to discuss with anyone who enjoys the sport and have a detailed conversation with them."
LITERACY AS READING AND WRITING	Literacy is defined as the ability to read and write and is not placed in any community or cultural context.	6 occurrences, 5 papers	Maria: "To me, literacy is about learning and being taught to read and write."
OTHER		6 occurrences, 6 papers	Emily: "Literacy is competence or knowledge in a specialized area."

As shown in the table, twenty of the thirty-four students (roughly 59%) who chose to define literacy in their narratives defined it at some point as a community practice. Most of these statements defined what literacy means specifically in the author's chosen community, such as David's definition of literacy within the United States Army (see table 2). Six of these definitions set their

focus more broadly, explaining that in general, the definition of literacy must be placed in some sort of context. For example, Linus writes: “An essential part of communication, literacy is the ability to express your knowledge to a specific audience in a manner that will be meaningful to them.” This definition, which was also placed in the “literacy as communication” category, specifies that a literate person must be able to participate effectively in a specific community context.

Definitions in the “reading and writing plus” category often use the author’s changing understanding of literacy as a framing device, as with Courtney’s definition in table 2. An equal number of students emphasized communication in their definitions of literacy; this theme of “literacy as communication” occurred fourteen times over twelve texts. Examples include Luke’s definition of “soccer literacy” (table 2) as well as David’s previously-discussed explanation of literacy in the Army. As with the “literacy as community practice” category, these statements all attempted to contextualize literacy rather than discussing it as a set of isolable skills such as reading and writing.

Only five students referenced the definition of literacy solely as the ability to read and write (often in those exact terms). These five students represent 14.7% of the students who defined literacy in their narratives and .045% of the total number of student participants. Notably, they all qualified their definition in some way. Two students used phrases indicating that the definition was their own personal definition (“To me, literacy is . . .” and “My definition of traditional literacy is . . .,” respectively). In positioning their definitions as personal to them, they are implicitly acknowledging that other people can have different definitions. Whether this is a genuine belief or an attempt to placate the instructor, it shows some degree of grappling with the troublesome knowledge that literacy is contextual and can extend beyond reading and writing.

Another student in the “reading and writing” category, George, defines literacy in the first line of his narrative: “Literacy is known as the quality or state of being literate, especially the ability to read and write.” Though uncredited, it is likely that George took this definition from dictionary.com, as it appears to be an exact quote. Though this may be an instance of the “open with the dictionary definition” trope, it is worth noting that he does not choose to open with the simpler definition of literacy as “the ability to read and write.” Instead, the circularity of the first half and the use of the qualifier “especially” position reading and writing as one of several abilities that can be considered “literacy.” In a similar vein, Susannah indicates that her definition of literacy is one of many by specifying that the term is “traditionally understood as the ability to read and write,” implying that there are other, less traditional understandings of the term. Later, she refers to writing letters as “an universal literacy,”⁷ using the indefinite article to indicate that it is one of several literacies. These cases

suggest that even when students choose to focus their definitions on reading and writing, some still position the conventional definition of literacy as one of many possible definitions.

Students who did not include an explicit definition of literacy illustrated their understanding by telling stories about lessons they had learned and knowledge they had acquired, then explaining how each bit of knowledge contributes to their literacy. For example, Amir, who wrote his narrative about his experience as a sneaker collector, explains some of the terminology that a person would need to know to be literate in “sneaker culture”: “... the correct term to call the shoe enthusiast are ‘sneaker heads’... people that buy shoes, not because they like them per say, but because it’s the newest thing out are called ‘hype beasts’.”

While many students centered their implicit definitions of literacy on language, not all did. Rather, several students’ explanations view literacy in a similar way as Gee, as mastery of a community’s communication and values. Such statements occurred 331 times in the corpus, over five times as often as explicit definitions of literacy. Moreover, these statements were present in 91 narratives, roughly 82% of the corpus. For example, Hamid describes the embodied literacies of soccer: “... you need to make quick decisions on what you should do whenever you have the ball. For instance, you are supposed to decide whether to pass the ball or shoot it as quickly as possible.” He then goes on to explain one of the most important attitudes a literate soccer player must adopt: “[My coach] advised me to keep my dreams ahead of me when I play. He said, ‘Look at the goal you want to reach, look forward to accomplish new things, and seek to break the previous records and put your own records’.” While these aspects of soccer literacy do not focus on language, they are for him as essential as language and communication to developing full literacy in soccer. Explanations like this one show that, even when the students chose not to explicitly define literacy within their narratives, most still understood the knowledge, communicative norms, and behaviors that constituted their chosen literacies.

Working with a prompt that explicitly encourages students to write about alternative literacies led them to define (and, in many cases, redefine) what literacy means in their own communities. In doing so, they demonstrated that their literacies are valid, complex, and worthy of bringing into the writing classroom. They also showed their understanding of literacy’s nuances and the many ways literacy can be defined; this level of awareness requires some critical thought. While not all students made their way through the threshold concept of literacy’s multiple, context-bound definitions, most appeared to be getting there. In approaching literacy from this perspective, students also produced narratives that differ in an important way from the ones that dominated Alex-

ander's above-referenced study: for the most part, they did not reproduce the myth that equates academic literacy with economic success.

Challenging the “Literacy Myth”

In expanding their discussions of literacy beyond the realm of printed text, students challenged the “literacy myth” or the “literacy-equals-success master narrative” that has been analyzed as a defining feature of student literacy narratives. Most narratives did not conform to this narrative pattern that Alexander found in almost all literacy narratives in her study. To test this observation, I isolated each instance of the “literacy-equals-success master narrative” present in my corpus using NVivo. While 59 out of Alexander's 60 students (98%) enacted this cultural narrative at some point in their texts (“Successes” 613-19), only 26 of my 111 (23%) did. This seems to suggest that a multiliteracies-focused literacy narrative does not prompt students to access this common cultural narrative in the same way the traditional literacy narrative can.

Interestingly, of the twenty-six students who included some form of this narrative, eighteen did not write narratives focusing on acquiring academic literacy. For instance, Stephen concludes his narrative about developing literacy in Boy Scouts by sharing how his experience has prepared him for later success:

Boy Scouts is a fantastic organization that has taught me so many things over the years that I would never learn in school. It has opened my eyes to all the amazing opportunities I could take advantage of in the future ... Personally, I think that every child should experience scouting. It teaches leadership, perseverance, discipline, and it made me the young man I am today.

In some ways, this passage reflects the “literacy-equals-success master narrative” Alexander describes. Stephen points to unnamed opportunities that his literacy has made possible, a statement that perhaps views literacy “as utilitarian and practical, a means to an end” and that certainly “emphasizes future outcomes of literacy” rather than the role it serves in the present (“Successes” 623).

However, he pushes back against this dominant narrative by grounding this claim in a non-print-based literacy and by not equating his literacy with *economic* success. The equation of literacy with economic success is problematic partly because of academic literacy's entanglement with issues of race, culture, and access. Though the Boy Scouts are certainly not immune to these issues, Stephen equates the possibility of future success with the character traits he learned through this literacy: “leadership, perseverance, [and] discipline.” Though he learned these values through scouting, they are values that could be

instilled through other means as well. And while he does recommend scouting for all children, he does not position his literacy (or literacy in general) as sufficient for or the only path to success. This works against the “literacy-equals-success” trope and allows for the possibility of other literacies or forces leading to one’s success or fulfillment. This understanding would be nearly impossible to achieve without first understanding that literacies are multiple and context-bound. Combined with the relative infrequency of the “literacy-equals-success narrative,” the fact that most of the students who invoked a version of this narrative did not do so in relation to academic literacy is significant. While not every student was able to undo a lifetime of cultural influence and wholly reject the literacy myth (perhaps an impossible goal for a one-semester introductory writing course), many do seem to be at some stage in moving through this threshold concept and acquiring a more nuanced view of literacy.

Conclusions and Implications

When exposed to the New Literacy Studies and multiliteracies, most students demonstrated some degree of understanding of the contextual nature of literacy in their narratives. Framing students’ own knowledge and community affiliations in terms of literacy gave them a framework through which to approach literacy as a construct. Whether they limited their definitions to specific communities or specified that literacy is context- or community-dependent, very few students wrote about literacy as the decontextualized skills of reading and writing. Even this small step enabled them to adopt a more inclusive, just understanding of literacy and to see the intelligence and expertise involved in a wider range of community practices. This resists the simplification inherent in the literacy myth.

This multiliteracies-focused unit also seems to accomplish Susan DeRosa’s goal of using literacy narratives to help students critically reflect on literacy. However, students need to be guided in their reflection, especially early in their college writing careers. In a study conducted after her above-cited literacy narrative analysis, Alexander argues that instructors need to be more explicit in describing the types of reflection they want to see in their students’ narratives: “For instance, if we see it as a particular goal of literacy narratives for students to examine and reflect upon certain ideological positions, we could explicitly discuss such values and ask students to articulate how events in their literacy lives lead them to embrace, reject, or appropriate these values” (“From Story” 61). Specifically asking students to think beyond reading and writing seemed to make them think more specifically and critically about literacy, which enabled them to write richer, more original literacy narratives. Very few students reproduced the simplistic, decontextualized myth that equates literacy acquisition with professional or social mobility. Instead, they were more often able

to articulate the complexities of literacy and their relationship to it, working their way through the threshold concept of the context-boundedness of literacy. By crossing the threshold into a more contextual definition of literacy, some students began to question the assumption that academic literacy is a necessary and sufficient condition for success, critically evaluate the ways in which this literacy works to maintain power relations, and see the literacies practiced by a wider variety of people, including themselves.

This is perhaps most vividly illustrated by June, who frames her narrative around developing “literacy in cultural sensitivity.” She opens her narrative with the following:

I was always one to consider myself intelligent and educated ... When it came to reading and writing, I was not only proficient, but enjoyed it ... My junior year of high school, I became increasingly more aware of my vulnerable position in society by being black, and being female. I was naïve, ambitious, and ignorant of what the world held beyond my shallow world views. As I was exposed to more and more of the real world through media outlets, and community gatherings, I began to question my ideals and my morals until I thought I had a decent composite of my identity and what it meant, especially what it meant in relation to other people, and societal denominations ... At that point in my life I didn't consider being black or female bad, but I wasn't to a level of education in cultural sensitivity that allowed me to recognize or acknowledge my disadvantages and realize that there was an establishment that promoted and enabled my detriments. I openly sought education and I realized that as far as school went, there were no classes or organizations that could teach me what I wanted to know. I knew plenty of American and World history, but I did not know my own.

As she begins to educate herself on social justice issues, she becomes more and more aware of the societal limitations placed on her because of her race and gender. She continues:

I have the privilege of being educated, able bodied, and cis-gender. But, I have the disadvantages of being black, being female, being low class, having unacknowledged mental health restrictions, being outspoken yet disregarded among my predominantly white community, having my features mocked and criticized, while simultaneously praised on other races, being too young to have a say, and being trivialized to the point of invisibility. It does make me angry. It makes me angry that somehow I am a part of a society that has taught me

and at one point made me believe that ... other people are not only superior to me, but that they should be, and that as long as people have tried to initiate change, there has been little, if any, change.

Here, June clearly has a deep understanding about how her education—her academic literacy—does not make her immune from the forces of institutionalized racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. Yet, her burgeoning social justice literacy puts her in contact with equality-focused, pro-Black people and communities both local and distant. She closes her essay with: “Because of my literacy, there is nothing that could convince me that I am inferior. There is no other skin tone that I would prefer on my body, there is no end to the self-love that I have gained ... I have the will of contention, I write my own slam poems, and as long as that literacy, that knowledge, that rekindling of sensitivity remains, I will maintain a firm and resolute faith in my beliefs.”

Another example, Will, author of “Here Come the Nuns” in table 1, writes about his experience as a non-Catholic at a Catholic school. Several times, he uses the phrase “tyranny of Catholicism” when discussing his educational experience. He describes his feelings of oppression at his Catholic school, noting that people at the school would tell him that he is “going to hell” for not following the teachings of the Catholic church. Will also describes the pushback he received from classmates about his decision to take the Eucharist as a non-Catholic (a practice prohibited by the church):

Imagine a school gym filled with a few hundred of your fellow classmates ... They stare at me expecting me not to reach out to fathers hand and take the bread. As I reach out and grab the bread and put it in my mouth you can see the eyebrows of some raising in curiosity, “Did he really just do that?” “He’s not even Catholic.” I can hear the whispers as I walk past in the isle of kids ... a friend of mine Sarah would always ask me every mass, “Why do you always go up and take communion if you’re not Catholic?” I would simply tell her “Just because I was never confirmed doesn’t mean I don’t believe in God.”

Will is repeatedly questioned, stared at, and even told he’s “going to hell” for refusing to participate as a fully literate member of his school community. While he does mention a few positive experiences at the school and reflects on how the struggles he experienced made him a stronger person, Will ultimately concludes that his educational experience did not strengthen his relationship with God and that the school’s focus on religion and the stigma he felt as an outsider were “a distraction from learning.” Because he chose not to

become fully literate in the community and its rituals, his lack of literacy held him back in his high school career.

Another student, Gabriela, came to see through the literacy narrative assignment that she possesses a literacy not sanctioned by the academy: softball. In her narrative, she describes her initial struggles with the sport and how she became literate by learning the “unofficial” rules, strategies, and plays needed to be successful. Her narrative frames her softball team as a community whose rules and norms she had to learn. When she later struggled with an academic literacy—her college calculus course—her knowledge of alternative literacies gave her confidence. Because she struggled to learn the literacy of softball and eventually overcame her difficulty, she began to understand that she could do the same with calculus. In her interview, she speculates about how writing her literacy narrative will give her confidence in the future, as she works toward medical school:

I think as I struggle in futures or struggle, like, in the career itself, that I can look back on this and really remember the thing that fired me up about being a doctor as the same as firing me up about being a softball player and to really push it ... I think that my career and education and softball actually lines up pretty well because I was told that I didn't have a good understanding of algebra and understanding math, and that I wouldn't be able to continue. And it was the same thing with softball junior year when I was trying to be on varsity when my coach told me that I just didn't have enough experience or I just wasn't at the level of being a varsity player with the others. And so that set me back, just like in math, but you know you have to come back from it and keep going. And that's when I did varsity senior year ... So I can really connect it and look back. So I'm really happy I wrote [the literacy narrative].

Aside from the inherent benefits of acquiring a clearer and more just worldview, the process of critically analyzing the meaning of literacy can build students' confidence in their own diverse literacies.

Moreover, I believe this unit validates multiliteracies in a way that is mindful of Bruce Horner's critique of the academy's treatment of alternative literacies:

But in [defending the validity of multiliteracies], we need ... to find ways to focus on the labor of these groups as they continuously rework, and thereby renew, literacy, texts, practices, and contexts—whether deemed “academic” or otherwise ... we should not resort to seeing ourselves as givers of the honorific of “literacy” to a broader range of forms and practices. Instead we can join these others in the

active work with literacy in which they have always already been engaged. (6)

In allowing students to select the topics of their narratives and define literacy for themselves, students are given the opportunity to decide what literacy means to them. This project can therefore be viewed as one step toward creating a classroom that nurtures students' perspectives, experience, and agency. Giving students the power to define their own literacies challenges the traditional power dynamics associated with literacy and helps them move through literacy's context-dependence as a threshold concept.

While the students in this study are, of course, at various stages of moving through the threshold concept of literacy's context-dependence, their work demonstrates that many of them developed a greater understanding of literacy and of composition as a discipline. The diversity of their topic selection also indicates a developing understanding of multiliteracies and how their own lives have been impacted by alternative literacies. As students continue their education and their lives beyond the academy, they can carry with them the knowledge that literacy is dynamic, multivalent, and contextual. While this knowledge may not be enough to rescue us from the perpetual "literacy crisis," individuals' transformed thinking can contribute to a fuller, more inclusive, more just understanding of literacy today.

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Notes

1. All participants provided written consent for their work to be used. They are referred to by pseudonyms. All components of this study have been approved by the University's IRB and the English Department.

2. The instructional materials from this unit, including the literacy narrative project prompt, can be accessed at <https://literacynarrativeunit.weebly.com/>.

3. While I contacted 55 randomly selected students to be interviewed (five from each section), only five completed an interview.

4. I use passages from student interviews to supplement and illustrate my findings; for the purposes of this article, interview transcripts were not included in the study corpus.

5. I did this by creating "nodes" for each potential category. Nodes allow the researcher to tag entire sources or discrete passages according to common themes.

6. Several papers defined literacy multiple times.

7. In direct quotes, I preserved students' spelling, usage, etc. to accurately portray their voices (except in cases where doing so would impede understanding). In this case, I don't know whether the student is from an area where the construction "an universal" would be common.

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