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ALITERATE COLLEGE STUDENTS: NEGLECTING TO READ OR ENGAGING IN A
NEW TYPE OF LITERACY?

by

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B.S. Southeastern University, 2009

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Composition
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the literacy practices of college students in order to determine whether their reading habits are likely to detract from their future professions. Based on reports that many college students and individuals in general do not read regularly, this study examines numerous studies that focus on the reading habits of students and their attitudes toward reading. Findings show that a considerable number of students do not practice what many educators consider to be “good” reading habits; that is, they do not read approved print literature and texts regularly. This study also introduces the idea that perhaps students are supplementing traditional reading with engagement in new types of literacy, including digital literacy, which might still yield positive benefits that are commonly associated with reading in its traditional sense. Educators are called to adopt an expanded notion of literacy that would recognize the validity of new literacies in the lives of students. Viewing literacy in this way would promote literacy amongst students, providing them with valuable tools for their futures. Moreover, adopting an expanded definition of literacy would alter how aliteracy reports such as the ones discussed in this study would be assessed.

Dedicated to my amazing husband, David, who provided inspiration and encouragement throughout this entire project.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The goals for literacy have very recently seen a shift in education. While it remains foundational that students attain literacy at the least, how much and what students read has undoubtedly changed over the years, consequently calling educators to change their goals and strategies for preparing literate students for their futures. Through this research, I intend to demonstrate the importance of literacy for the modern college students as it is not only holds the key skills for attaining their education, but also because it is part of a process that will enable them to succeed in their careers, in turn affecting the advancement of the nation.¹ Moreover, I will argue for a revised conception of literacy that takes into account the emergence of valid new literacies. Literacy, however, can prove to be a very complex subject comprised of much controversy, complicating the idea of a properly literate college student. As I will discuss throughout this research, literacy is not so easy to define, and so it is not easy to assess; thus, the foundational concept of literacy merits attention. It is important to explore what literacy is for the modern college student, its importance for this demographic, and how it is practiced by these professionals-in-training. The research will lead to a discussion of new and digital literacies and how they factor into the modern student's habits and education. As a greater number of individuals are enrolled in higher education now more than ever before (United States Department of Labor, "College Enrollment Up"), the literacy habits developed and practiced in these institutions will undoubtedly influence the future literacy of the nation.

¹ For this research, success is specific to literacy-related activities. It refers to the ability for individuals to easily accomplish or at the least to have the tools to attain the ability to accomplish literacy-related tasks throughout their lifetime.

First, it is essential that the definition of literacy is agreed upon if the literacy of college students can be gauged. The very definition of literacy, however, has caused much contention as of late. Scholars like Harvey J. Graff and Brian Street argue that up until recently literacy has mistakenly been assumed to simply refer to the ability of individuals to read and write. As Graff points out in his text *The Labyrinths of Literacy*, this definition of literacy only considers the skills of literacy while failing to recognize its intricacies and implications (18). The ability to read and write alone means nothing should the literate individual be unable to decode the meaning of the text. Graff explains that at its most basic level, literacy should rather be understood to be “a technology or set of techniques for communication and decoding and reproducing written or printed materials” (*Labyrinths* 19). Renee Hobbs, advocate for media literacy education, further contests that literacy should not be confined to written or printed materials alone, as Graff’s understanding implies. Hobbs describes literacy as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms,” the emphasis being on the variety of forms (7). In the current technological era, a considerable number of contemporary scholars focus on the relationship of literacy and new mediums of communication, arguing for definitions of literacy that recognize these new mediums. Like Hobbs, many would argue that the understanding of literacy should be expanded to include the encoding and decoding of a variety of messages in a diversity of forms.

Questions as to the meaning of literacy have additionally called attention to what comprises the basic levels of literacy. It would appear that most theorists, like Graff, agree that the most basic level of literacy describes the simple skills of reading and writing. The problem that many scholars find is that some students are content with attaining only the basic level that

allows them to function, but impedes their ability to succeed at more advanced literate activities. Other scholars like Mina Shaughnessy and David Bartholomae, however, argue that satisfaction with the basic levels of literacy does not alone render students “basic writers” and “basic readers.” A student’s status as a “basic writer” may in fact be the result of a number of factors during their literacy development that inhibited their ability to develop more advanced literacy skills. So rather than think of students stuck in the “basics” of literacy as “lazy” students who do not care to advance their literacy skills, scholars like Shaughnessy argue that educators must recognize each student’s situation in order to adequately respond to and ideally progress the literacy of “basic” students (“Diving In”). It may be that different strategies might better advance a “basic” student’s literacy.

Discussions of basic literacy like these and arguments concerning literacy in general are important for considering the numerous studies that report on the condition of literacy in this country. The very understanding of what constitutes basic literacy and how it affects students and teachers, for example, will directly influence the reading of a report on the number of basic writers in college. That is, when “literacy” is assessed, the very definition of literacy itself is important for understanding the results of the assessments. It must be clear whether literacy refers to only its basic skills or to more complex tasks or habits. As I will discuss more at length throughout this paper, the definition of literacy directly influences the results of such reports, which in turns affects our reaction to those results.

In addition to the debate over what is meant when using the term “literacy,” during the last century scholars like Ira Shor and Paulo Freire have called us to look more closely at the social, political, and economic implications introduced to us through literacy. Cushman et al.

would attribute this focus to a social turn in literacy studies (5). Since the invention of reading and writing, literacy has influenced society, politics, and the economy of civilizations as well as individuals. As an example, one can look at literacy's role in the Protestant Reformation. Prior to the Reformation, literacy was often reserved for an elite few such as church clerics and royalty, who wielded literacy as a tool to ensure their power over the illiterate masses (Collins and Blot 2). Theorist Harvey J. Graff explains that literacy during this time in history was the key to power politically, socially, and financially. One of the biggest turns during the Reformation was when individual European citizens gained literacy. They were empowered by their literacy because they were finally able to read and interpret important political texts for themselves as opposed to having to trust the interpretations of others who were literate (*The Legacies of Literacy* 10). Moreover, Graff points out that at the time literacy additionally served as a political tool used to create unity among the masses who were gaining independence. Historical accounts became homogenized as youths were given government-approved texts. In this way, literacy, while empowering each citizen, was still used to maintain political power.

The push for literacy in Western Civilization resulted directly from the recognition of literacy's power. Graff explains that over time Western civilizations recognized the potential benefit literacy had for their societies: "[They] stressed schooling [literacy] for social stability and the assertion of appropriate hegemonic functions" (*The Literacy Myth* 22). Literacy was recognized as "the medium for training," where values could be instilled in the young, ideally leading to less crime and more economic payoff (Graff, *The Literacy Myth* 23). As such, civilizations have taken great efforts to secure widespread literacy for citizens for their own gain. Furthermore, higher education institutions have focused on preparing students for the literacy

demands that they will encounter in their futures. As Brandt explains, society values literacy because “as a resource, literacy has potential payoff in gaining power or pleasure, in accruing information, civil rights, education, spirituality, status money” (5). Consequently, societies like our own have taken great lengths to produce literate citizens.

While aspects of literacy have certainly changed over the centuries, in most cases the ability to read and write and interpret text is still equated with power and still initiates many of the same political, social, and economic divides. In the West, literacy does not always ensure power, but illiteracy surely entails a lack of power in a highly literate society. Those who remain illiterate in a society so dedicated to producing literate citizens render themselves ill-equipped when they wish to participate in social and political functions. Furthermore, expectations for literacy continually increase, becoming more sophisticated as society changes. Brandt explains, “Economic transformations, as they appear in family work, regional restructuring, communication systems, and political organization, [have been] the engine of change in literacy learning, setting an especially brisk pace over the last several decades” (4). Unfortunately, those who are unable to adapt their literacy to the newest advancements become subservient to those who are able to keep up.

As a result, literacy is desirable because it is oftentimes equated with liberation of the mind as well as social status, a theory that does not always necessarily prove to be true. Freire discusses this topic at length in his works. From a framework based in the oppressive education system of Brazil, Freire seeks to dispel the myth that literacy alone provides liberation, instead arguing that critical thought should necessarily accompany literacy education to be of benefit. According to Freire’s theories, individuals and even governments at times mistakenly assume

that literacy will ensure economic and social freedom when in reality, literacy's relationship with liberation is much more complex (Meek vi). Governments will assume that giving students the tools of reading and writing will equip them to succeed; however, Freire's work emphasizes that literacy instruction must accompany what he calls "conscientization" or "critical consciousness" (Berthoff xiii). Critical consciousness describes the attitude acquired with literacy that understands literacy to be "a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" rather than simply a set of technical skills (Freire and Macedo ix). Shor likewise reminds us that literacy does not always necessarily constitute liberation. In his book *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life*, Shor describes the popular false belief that education will be "the great equalizer," equipping all individuals to succeed should they acquire an education. Shor describes the education system in America as a way to homogenize the American people and as a way to prolong individuals from entering a workforce that does not contain enough jobs for which students are being prepared (7). Thus, education and literacy do not ensure liberation or even success. It appears that much more is required for an individual to be liberated and successful than simply the technical ability to read and write. While it is true that acquiring basic literacy enables individuals to perform many fundamental tasks, they will still be held back from their fullest potential if they are unable to think and use literacy at a more sophisticated level.

Recognizing the reality of the literacy as liberation myth, Freire and Shor both support a pedagogy that takes literacy and education further than the basics. That is, Freire and Shor advocate a social stance towards literacy where individuals are taught to use their literacy to think and respond critically to their situation. "This pedagogy challenges teachers and students to empower themselves for social change, to advance democracy and equality as they advance their

literacy and knowledge” (Shor, “Education is Politics” 24). Literacy is not homogenous, nor is it confined to just the basics of reading and writing. Rather, literacy enables one to think critically and participate socially. Moreover, when used critically, literacy can instead upset the established order.

Nevertheless, it is a commonplace in the American enabling narrative that getting an education will ensure success for the individual. In his essay “The Nineteenth-Century Origins of Our Times,” Graff explains that the literacy myth has continually pervaded all American populations. For example, African Americans during the nineteenth century held to the belief that attaining literacy would ensure their freedom (217). Furthermore, Graff makes the point that Caucasians feared the power that African Americans would acquire along with literacy. However, there are many more social factors at play that affect the success an individual can attain. Henry Giroux, another noted advocate of critical pedagogy, agrees with Shor that literacy in the education system is all too often used as a tool to homogenize and control students. As such, Giroux argues that a critical view should be applied to education so that schools are actually seen as sites where competing cultures meet and exchange dialogue (7). With a critical view, literacy cannot be relegated to simply technical skills, but should rather be taught as part of a social process, an idea also argued by Freire. As students are invited to take a critical look at the education they receive, looking specifically at why they are receiving it and what is at play, then literacy is truly functioning at a higher level that can permit liberation. It is most important to note from these arguments that literacy does not necessarily constitute liberation or success, and that literacy is much more than just the basic skills of reading and writing. I must digress here, however, and maintain that even still, it is vital that one attains basic literacy if they are to

succeed in American society. That is, literacy is a key to success, but it does not ensure success. Literacy is part of a larger process that leads toward success in a certain cultural group.

It is with this in mind that I introduce a more recent issue plaguing literacy studies. While the majority of Americans can now read and write due to the strict measures the United States has taken to ensure literacy for every one of its citizens, a new problem threatens the success that literacy presumably entails. Studies have revealed a disconcerting trend in literacy habits where literate individuals do not read regularly. Aliteracy, as this trend has been labeled, refers specifically to the neglect of capable readers to read frequently. It is feared that aliteracy renders citizens incapable of performing the type of sophisticated literate tasks that would enable them to succeed. Although students attain literacy, it is much less useful to the student and to society should they neglect to practice it. Scholars postulate that aliteracy not only keeps citizens uninformed and unable to adapt to new literacy standards, but that literacy skills that have been acquired will over time stagnate due to neglect (Krashen). Even more alarming for some is the fact that a considerable number of college students can be classified as aliterate.

Studies reveal that due to a variety of factors, a significant number of college students, a demographic to whom literacy is integral, are now considered aliterate. As I will discuss in depth throughout this paper, many educators are concerned that aliteracy will work against the students' education, inhibiting their success because of the purported dangers of aliteracy. It is feared that if students do not read, they will not learn materials that will help them in their future professions. Moreover, Stephen Krashen, noted education theorist, makes the argument that the literacy skills students do acquire will not be sufficient as literacy tasks become more complex (*The Power of Reading*). A lack of reading will inhibit students' ability to adapt to the

continually rising literacy standards in the United States. Furthermore, as critical pedagogy advocates like Giroux, Freire, Street, and Shor argue, students who contentedly believe that acquiring rudimentary literacy skills will ensure success will surely be disappointed as critical thought will not be refined in just the basics of literacy, in turn hindering the ability to reach their full potential.

Throughout this paper, I will explore aliteracy and its implications for college students more in depth. I will begin in Chapter Two by exploring the benefits of attaining literacy, as it is imperative that educators understand why literacy is so important in the first place for the modern college student before understanding the dangers of illiteracy. After a look at what research says literacy enables a person to do, in Chapter Three I will discuss the aliteracy epidemic and why it is problematic for our nation. In Chapter Three I will investigate the landmark studies that reveal the prevalence of aliteracy as well as the factors contributing to its increase. In Chapter Four I will narrow my investigation to aliteracy amongst college students specifically, as is the main concern for this study, first exploring the reading expectations for college students followed by an analysis of the rate of aliteracy amongst college students as reported by recent studies. Debates over what constitutes literacy will be woven throughout this discussion. Chapter Five considers an expanded definition of literacy built on the acceptance of new and emerging literacies. As Graff points out in his book *The Legacies of Literacy*, “Discussion about literacy levels rarely pause to consider what is meant by literacy...this failure invalidates most discussions at their outset...” (3). Consequently, I will then discuss a few of the emerging literacies introduced by an expanded definition of literacy in order to flesh out the severity of the reported aliteracy rate amongst college students. At this point, I will return to the

debate over what actually constitutes literacy, considering the implications that a new definition of literacy would have on aliteracy studies about college students. Finally, in Chapter Six I will entertain speculations about what an expanded definition of literacy would mean for aliteracy studies and for the literacy education of college students.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERACY

Before inspecting the problem of aliteracy and its implications for college students, it is important that I first establish the benefits associated with academic literacy, specifically reading. While literacy is recognized by many to mean more than just the reading and writing of print texts, especially with the advent of new literacies such as digital literacy, I will still begin with what research has to say about the benefits associated with reading print text. As I will later discuss, new literacies will offer many of the same benefits for the modern college student. After discussing the social and cognitive advantages associated with literacy I can more fully explain how and why aliteracy is problematic worldwide, but even more so for college students. Furthermore, before I can proceed to examine the prevalence of aliteracy in America I must trace recent literacy developments and practices throughout the last century to accurately understand the progression to the current problem: a nation of functionally literate, yet simultaneously aliterate individuals, and more importantly, aliterate professionals-in-training within the university.

Cognitive and Social Implications of Reading

Walter Ong, a prominent figure in literacy studies, states the importance of literacy this way, “Without writing [and consequently reading], the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness” (*Orality and Literacy* 78). The practices of reading and writing have influenced

the human mind's methods of processing and producing information. Whereas primarily oral cultures relied on mnemonic and narrative devices in order to retain information, constituting its own necessary thought processing, the ability to record thought through writing eliminated the need for those devices that were essential to preserving thought and history (Ong, "Orality, Literacy , and Modern Media" 66). The written word changed the way we process information as well as the way cultures operate. In the United States, which is no longer primarily orally-based but primarily literacy-based, illiteracy prevents individuals from participating at their fullest potential both socially as well as cognitively. Consequently, being literate at this point in western culture is not only beneficial to individuals, but it has become essential.

Reading Comprehension and Writing Ability

Research shows that one of the benefits of literacy, specifically reading, is that literacy has an undeniably positive effect on reading comprehension and writing ability (Cunningham and Stanovich; Stanovich; Krashen; Walberg and Tsai). In his book *Teaching and Assessing Writing*, Edward M. White describes reading and writing as being inextricably bound, that the two have a reciprocal effect upon each other. Thus, reading is bound to comprehension; the more one reads, the more one can comprehend (Krashen, *The Power of Reading* 2). Furthermore, Krashen finds that more exposure to reading makes individual's writing more fluent and complex (*The Power of Reading* 5). Cognitive psychologists Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich cite the reason for the tight-knit relationship between reading and comprehension this way: "Exposure to print serves to develop processes and knowledge bases that facilitate reading

comprehension” (“Early Reading Acquisition”). In this way, literacy is reciprocal, as suggested by White: the more one reads, the better one reads, which in turn influences writing ability.

In “What Reading Does for the Mind,” Cunningham and Stanovich argue the idea that reading is reciprocal through their empirically-based study of how reading shapes the quality of the cognitive processes. They allude to what is known as the “Matthew Effect” to describe the reciprocal nature of reading (“What Reading Does” 137). The Matthew Effect, a concept used often in science, takes its name from a verse in the Gospel of Matthew that describes the condition of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer (Matthew 25:29). In terms of literacy, the Matthew Effect would imply that more proficient readers continue to become better readers, while poor reading abilities restrain already struggling readers, impeding their ability to interpret text. Herbert J. Walberg and Shiow-Ling Tsai, described in Cunningham and Stanovich’s article, apply the precepts of the Matthew Effect to education in order to explain the phenomenon where students who are more engaged in school receive more benefit from their education while those who are less inclined to participate in school have more trouble learning.

Cunningham and Stanovich specifically look at the Matthew Effect in literacy practices. They determine that the more texts one is exposed to, the more cognitive skills in comprehension and decoding one acquires. Furthermore, the more one reads, the more vocabulary acquisition occurs. Conversely, “the combination of deficient decoding skills, lack of practice, and difficult materials results in unrewarding early reading experiences that lead to less involvement in reading-related activities” (Cunningham and Stanovich, “What Reading Does” 137). Additionally, in *The Power of Reading*, Krashen specifically addresses the Matthew Effect’s impact on an individual’s writing style. The more one reads, the more vocabulary and writing

styles an individual is exposed to, resulting in the ability to write more fluently (72). These results are what lead Cunningham and Stanovich to conclude that literacy is reciprocal in nature: the better readers continue to improve their reading abilities and comprehension while disinclination toward reading perpetually inhibits reading abilities and those cognitive skills associated with reading (“Early Reading Acquisition” 934).

Vocabulary Acquisition

Reading also positively affects vocabulary acquisition. As Krashen points out, “A large vocabulary is, of course, essential for mastery of a language,” implying that the greater command of vocabulary one has, the more potential for success (“We Acquire Vocabulary” 440). Numerous studies have reported that reading can provide a rich groundwork for children to accumulate vocabulary words through exposure to those words in context (Cunningham and Stanovich; Jenkins, Stein, and Wysocki; Krashen; Stanovich; Stanovich, West, and Harrison). After extensive study of language acquisition, Cunningham and Stanovich join results from their studies with those of others’ to posit that the majority of the vocabulary a child acquires does not occur due to direct teaching, but through indirect exposure, and that the main difference between children’s vocabularies correlates with the amount of print they have been exposed to (“What Reading Does” 138). Since written vocabulary is much more extensive than verbal (“What Reading Does” 138), Cunningham and Stanovich argue that students who read more will acquire a greater vocabulary that will better enable them for their future professions both in written and oral skills. Drawing from their research into the cognitive implications of reading, Cunningham and Stanovich purport that reading frequently and widely for children makes for “a significant

contribution to multiple measures of vocabulary, general knowledge, spelling, and verbal fluency...” (143).

Reading augments vocabulary acquisition by providing individuals with the opportunity to see words used in context. Krashen supports this claim in his article “We Acquire Vocabulary and Spelling by Reading.” In this article, Krashen pulls from a number of studies to test the input hypothesis, which would suggest that reading is a reliable means of supporting and enriching language acquisition. In one such study, Nagy, Herman, and Anderson used a Read and Test method to determine the vocabulary acquisition of elementary students. They found that the student’s exposure to an unknown word in print resulted in a small, yet reliable increase in vocabulary acquisition: “They [Nagy’s team] found that the chance of a subject’s acquiring a word from one exposure was between five and twenty percent, depending on the testing method” (qtd. in Krashen, “We Acquire Vocabulary” 446). Although the statistical chance for acquisition might be minimal as reported by Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, reading’s affect on acquisition is reliable. It is through reading words in context that the potential for vocabulary acquisition increases. Furthermore, regardless of the minimal chance of acquisition through exposure to a word only once, if an individual reads enough, the percentage of vocabulary acquisition will reasonably increase (Krashen, “We Acquire Vocabulary” 446). Krashen argues that “competence in spelling and vocabulary is most efficiently attained by comprehensible input in the form of reading” (“We Acquire Vocabulary” 440). Thus, research supports the hypothesis that reading plays a substantial role in preparing individuals for success through exposing them to a more extensive vocabulary. Since reading exposes individuals to words they might not hear orally, reading provides individuals with a rich repertoire of words available to them for articulation.

Moreover, individuals who read frequently are less likely to be impeded by words or phrases rarely used in speech (Cunningham and Stanovich, “What Reading Does” 138), a factor that might become benefit them at some point in their futures and professions.

Declarative Knowledge

In addition to reading’s positive impact on vocabulary acquisition, it also has a profound effect on the accumulation of declarative knowledge (Cunningham and Stanovich; Stanovich; Stanovich, West, and Harrison). In “What Reading Does for the Mind,” Cunningham and Stanovich examine the results of a study that investigates reading experience’s impact on age-related growth in declarative knowledge (811). Participants were surveyed about their exposure to print, i.e., whether they prefer reading over other activities, and how much they read in order to determine the relationship between declarative knowledge and reading. Then, to gauge their declarative knowledge, participants answered a 45-question multiple choice test pertaining to general cultural literacy questions that high school students would be expected to know the answers to. Additionally, participants were given a set of 62 words and non-words and were asked to place a check next to the sets of letters that they knew were words. From the results of this study, Cunningham and Stanovich found that there is a positive correlation between reading and declarative knowledge that spans age. “Print is a uniquely rich source of content knowledge. The world’s storehouse of knowledge is readily available for those who read, and much of this information is not attained from other sources” (819). Thus, even at an advanced age, declarative knowledge can still be acquired through reading-related activities.

After examining the results of their study that surveyed various possible factors in gaining declarative knowledge, Cunningham and Stanovich constitute reading as one of the most influencing factors on one's cognitive abilities: "We have suggested that one of the most powerful experiential determinants of individual differences in vocabulary and declarative knowledge is exposure to print" ("Early Reading Acquisition" 935). Hofstetter, Stich, and Hofstetter's study of the relationship between knowledge, literacy, and power further supports Cunningham and Stanovich's theory of reading's positive relationship with declarative knowledge. In their article "Knowledge, Literacy and Power" they state: "Reading is a key to developing knowledge. Literacy, defined as reading, seems to be a more frequent activity of more knowledgeable adults, and reading appears to be a more important activity for the acquisition of knowledge than is consuming broadcast media" (75). These and other studies support the theory that reading positively contributes to the declarative knowledge of an individual.

Lifelong Learning

Perhaps most importantly, reading promotes lifelong learning. Society continually demands more literacy-related skills, and reading enables individuals to adapt to these demands (Agee; Krashen; Mikulecky). In his article addressing the literacy demands for the workplace in the next millennium, Michael W. Kibby states, "The increasing demand for literacy over the last century and the seemingly endless generation of new knowledge make it obvious that the present reading sophistication of most students will need to be stepped up several notches to meet tomorrow's workplace needs" (qtd. in Agee 246). Krashen further claims that even now "Many

people don't read and write well enough to handle the complex literacy demands of modern society" (Krashen, *The Power of Reading* ix). One of the solutions for meeting these rising literacy demands is reading. By reading texts related to work-related concerns as well as texts that keep the reader current on civic and social trends and news, individuals are enabled to meet the increasing demands of society. Peter Deekle deems reading the most critical skill acquired by lifelong learners (268).

Reading is instrumental for the development of lifelong learners (Fitzpatrick and Smith 4). Lifelong learning is crucial to the development of the individual beyond school years, making it critical that schools instill these habits, specifically good literacy habits, in students. Furthermore, reading practices only related to school requirements will not suffice; individuals must practice habits that will enable them to increase their knowledge throughout their lifetimes, long after they have graduated. As Larry Mikulecky, head of the Department of Language Education at Indiana University and literacy scholar, warns, without learning the habit of reading, reading skills will decline or stagnate, and their skills will be "substandard" within a decade ("Aliteracy" 6).

Furthermore, as Fitzpatrick and Smith describe in their article "Reading and Life-Long Learning," good reading habits may create more opportunities for individuals. Fitzpatrick and Smith provide the example of a person who, prior to a job interview, reads statements and information particular to that organization. In their scenario, this prior research on the part of the applicant impresses the employer and increases their chances of securing a job with that organization. Thus, for Fitzpatrick and Smith, the practice of good reading habits enables employment opportunities. Moreover, Fitzpatrick and Smith insist that lifelong learning skills are

accrued during one's education, placing responsibility for developing lifelong learners in institution-sanctioned literacy instruction.

Critical Thinking Skills

"It would be quite difficult today to find a competent teacher who would argue against the case that reading is thinking" states Marilyn Buckley Hanf in her article "Mapping: A Technique for Translating Reading into Thinking." Hanf then describes an activity suited for the classroom to further promote the critical thinking connected to reading. Hanf argues that it is important to implement reading activities in the classroom as it appears that reading complements and even invokes critical thinking skills. In fact, Clive Corder directly ties reading to the development of critical thinking skills. In his address given at the Worldwide Readership Research Symposium, Corder argues that critical thinking skills are crucial to the development of a democratic nation, making reading instrumental in the process. In his address he deduces the following: "If people do not read...this leads to a reduction in vocabulary and complex thinking..." which in turn threatens the nation's development (469).

Freirean ideology in fact argues that literacy should accompany critical thought for an individual to stand any chance at liberation. Anthony Burton describes his participation in a national program for adult literacy in Peru, a program rooted in the theories of Paulo Freire in the 1960s (236). In this program, isolated and illiterate Peruvian towns were taught basic literacy. The idea, explains Burton, was that literacy was assumed to change the way the people thought; that is, it was believed that the poor people of Peru had a "submerged view of reality" because of their destitute and illiterate situation. Because they were unable to think critically, many

Peruvian adults were deemed incapable of changing their circumstances. Their inability to read and write was assumed to be one of the main contributing factors to their unemployment and lack of power; therefore, the organization Burton took part in sought to teach people to read, which they then believed would lead them to cultural awareness, ideally leading them to a critique of their circumstances. In this way, reading was empowering as it was a natural conduit of critical thinking. Furthermore, Freirean-based programs such as this demonstrate the social agency embedded in literacy.

Finally, the more complex reading skills that are developed, the more complex and rich critical thinking skills can be employed: “Reading is one of the primary mechanisms by which we exercise our intellectual faculties and increase our knowledge of the world” (Stanovich, West, and Harrison). Because reading sharpens critical thinking, it in turn affects the way one acts, having social and civic implications.

Economic Factors

The literacy achievements of individuals have definite economic implications (Green and Riddell; Reder; United States). Green and Riddell, economists at the University of British Columbia, purport that literacy achievements factor into one’s economic success. The results of the National Endowment for the Arts’ study of American literacy supports this finding: “Good readers generally have more financially rewarding jobs...More than 60% of employed proficient readers have jobs in management, or in the business, financial, professional, and related sectors” (United States 17). Conversely, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) concludes, “With lower levels of reading and writing ability, people do less well in the job market. Poor reading

skills correlate heavily with lack of employment, lower wages, and fewer opportunities for advancement” (United States 5). Thus, higher levels of reading ability result in higher earnings and occupational positions for individuals because employers desire high levels of literacy from their employees (United States 16): “The ability to read and, more recently, to write often helps to catapult individuals into higher economic brackets and social privilege” (Brandt 2). As one can see, reading affects one’s vocabulary, comprehension, declarative knowledge, and critical thinking skills—all of these skills make a person more of an asset to a company. Moreover, employers might find themselves faced with the burden of funding remedial courses for employees who lack the desirable literacy skills (United States Department of Labor, “Teachers”). Hiring highly literate individuals is an obvious preference for employers to eliminate unnecessary spending, not to mention the other previously established benefits of hiring literate individuals (United States).

In addition to literacy’s influence on the types of jobs that an individual might obtain, the Adult Literacy Development and Economic Growth study conducted by the National Institute for Literacy found that literacy’s impact on lifelong learning influences the promotions one might attain. “In the panel models of individual earnings, the initial level of literacy proficiency affects both the initial level of earnings *and* the rate of subsequent earnings *growth* for the individual” (Reder 19). This definite correlation between literacy growth and earnings in addition to the correlation between literacy proficiency and earnings reinforces the importance of literacy’s impact on lifelong learning (19). It is not only that the individual who can read and write will statistically earn more throughout their career, but that the continual reading and writing habits

of an individual lifelong learner will continue to play into the positive earnings that they will make throughout their lifetimes.

Civic and Social Participation

Regular reading not only boosts the likelihood of an individual's academic and economic success—facts that are not especially surprising—but it also seems to awaken a person's sense of social and civic responsibility. The NEA found that “Literary readers [those who read literature] are more than 3 times as likely as non-readers to visit museums, attend plays or concerts, and create artworks of their own. They are also more likely to play sports, attend sporting events, or do outdoor activities” (United States 18). The results of their study of American literacy lead the NEA to conclude that in this regard, “Reading correlates with almost every measurement of positive personal and social behavior surveyed” (United States 6). As the results of NEA's study suggests, proficient readers are more motivated to participate civically and socially than are barely literate or illiterate individuals. Research shows that proficient readers are more likely to participate in charities, vote in elections, finish high school, and secure a job (United States). This may stem back to Krashen's finding that among other things, frequent voluntary reading habits positively influence attitudes and self-esteem (*The Power of Reading* 4). Perhaps a more positive self-esteem coupled with more declarative knowledge and the opportunity to remain current on civic events makes highly literate individuals more likely to participate in society. Thus, engagement through reading recreates itself as engagement with society.

Literacy not only impacts the individual socially and civically; it has implications for how whole societies and cultures function. Helen Abadzi, Senior Evaluation Officer leading a study of adult literacy for the World Bank, explains literacy's place in worldwide relief:

Adult literacy is highly relevant to poverty alleviation efforts worldwide, because in the twenty-first century much of the information needed to make decisions and improve one's economic, personal, family, or political conditions is presented in written form. People must be able to decipher a script code quickly, understand the contents of the documents, and decide upon options transmitted in them. (Abadzi 9)

Literacy enables individuals to surmount cultural and economic boundaries around the world, according to Abazdi. The information necessary to aid people in reaching new levels of economic and social achievements is tied up in language; therefore, if one is unable to interpret the language, that person is at a disadvantage in achieving liberation, consistent with the theories of Paulo Freire. In the forward to Freire's text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull describes Freire's conception of reading as a tool for liberation in this way:

In fact, those who, in learning to read and write, come to a new awareness of selfhood and begin to look critically at the social situation in which they find themselves, often take the initiative in acting to transform the society that has denied them this opportunity of participation. Education is once again a subversive force.

If literacy has the potential to empower individuals to enact social change, as Freire would suggest, how much more enabling must literacy be for individuals living in a democratic, free nation? Other scholars such as Ira Shor, Harvey J. Graff, and Mike Rose also allude to the belief that literacy leads to liberation, including economic liberation, albeit they admit that this is not

always true; literacy does not guarantee liberation. Moreover, liberation is not to be conflated with economic success. However, as established earlier, literary achievements can yield economic profits for individuals as much as it can lead to liberation of the psyche. It is undeniable that in turn those economic goods as well as educated and aware minds will benefit the society that they are poured into.

20th Century Literacy in America

A more prominent value has been placed on literacy during the last few centuries. Deborah Brandt, who has written extensively about literacy in America, explicates a growing American view of literacy this way: “As a resource, literacy has potential payoff in gaining power or pleasure, in accruing information, civil rights, spirituality, status, money” (5). As a result of the increased value that has been placed on literacy, a push toward nation-wide literacy has increased. It is important to clarify here that the literacy we are referring to describes the traditional definition, consisting of the reading and writing of texts. The push for a literate nation can be attributed to the social and individual goods associated with literacy that have been published in the results of numerous literacy studies.

During the last two centuries, America has experienced marked intervals of special attention dedicated to literacy-related endeavors. In a report concerning the state of American literacy, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) describes the continual patterns of increased attention given to the literacy of Americans (Kirsch et al.). The NCES traces the thoughts surrounding literacy throughout the last century:

In the past, the lack of ability to read and use printed materials was seen primarily as an individual problem, with implications for a person's job opportunities, educational goals, sense of fulfillment, and participation in society. Now, however, it is increasingly viewed as a national problem, with implications that reach far beyond the individual. (Kirsch et al. xii)

As America strives to succeed, the fundamental need for literacy for all citizens has been recognized as a major factor in that success. Furthermore, as Brandt posits in her book *Literacy in American Lives*, "Unrelenting economic change has become the key motivator for schools, students, parents, states, and communities to raise expectations for literacy achievement" (26). Thus, throughout the last couple of centuries, literacy again and again has received national attention as the benefits of literacy have been realized.

In the late 19th century, many Americans were classified as illiterate, with illiteracy affecting approximately 20 percent of the American population (National Center for Education Statistics). Moreover, at the end of the 19th century and towards the beginning of the 20th century much of the population only had a limited education. In fact, as of 1940 more than half of the U.S. population had completed no more than an eighth grade education, although it is important to note that this statistic was not as grave for individuals at that time as it would be for an individual today (National Center for Education Statistics). Through increased efforts to ensure this limited view of literacy for more of the population, the total number of adults with a high school education rose to 40 percent by 1960, with an increase to 10 percent of individuals who had completed four years of college (National Center for Education Statistics). It is also important to point out that as jobs became increasingly more technical, education and literacy

became more important to employers. Consequently, since the 1960s the educational level and literacy of Americans has increased significantly. By 1979, the illiteracy rate had dropped to less than 1 percent of the population (National Center for Education Statistics). This is in part due to the obvious ties literacy has with cognitive and social benefits: “There is widespread agreement that we as a nation must respond to the literacy challenge, not only to preserve our economic vitality but also to ensure that every individual has a full range of opportunities for personal fulfillment and participation in society” (Kirsch et al. xii).

A number of political occurrences can be attributed to this most recent increase in education and literacy-based achievements of the 20th century. One of these incidences occurred in 1969 when U.S. Commissioner of Education James E. Allen challenged America to eliminate illiteracy by the end of the 1970s. In his 1969 address, Allen attacks the challenge of illiteracy and emphasizes the right to read for all citizens, as some citizens, especially minorities, had been denied this right: “Those who do not gain this ability [to read] in the course of their education lack a skill necessary to all other areas of learning and are being denied a fundamental right of education—the right to read” (96). Although Allen’s lofty goal was not achieved in that decade, his imperative initiated positive moves toward widespread literacy. Mikulecky states that of those positive moves, “The reading capabilities of low-performing children in urban and rural schools improved significantly, and most Americans became literate in the sense of being able to sign their names and do extremely basic reading” (“National Adult Literacy” 309).

During the 1970s, a significant movement now known as the back-to-the-basics movement demanded a return to the 3 Rs—reading, writing, and arithmetic—in American education. One of the organizing ideals of this movement was to institute “basic instruction

necessary to ensure literacy” (qtd. in Morgan and Robinson). Shortly after, in 1975, *Newsweek* published their infamous article “Why Johnny Can’t Read,” responding to the back-to-the-basics movement. “Why Johnny Can’t Read” instantly ignited alarm amongst parents with its proclamation of education’s failure to prepare students with even basic literacy:

If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. If they are not planning to attend college, their skills in writing English may not even qualify them for secretarial or clerical work. If they are attending elementary school, they are almost certainly not being given the kind of required reading material, much less writing instruction, that might make it possible for them to eventually write comprehensible English. (qtd. in “The Literacy Crisis”)

As a result of “Why Johnny Can’t Read” as well as the already mounting panic over illiteracy, educational institutions increased their efforts to promote literacy.

In the 1980s widespread illiteracy continued to remain a concern of many Americans. It was during this time that a shift began to occur in the politics of literacy. Initiated by Commissioner Allen’s attempt to eliminate illiteracy in the 1970s, politicians began to use literacy as a platform for campaigns. For example, literacy-related efforts were made in the late 1980s by California Superintendent of Education Bill Honig (Davenport and Jones). Honig proposed to the state of California an education reform that advocated a philosophy of literacy known as the “whole language” movement: “The essence of whole language is that, rather than

breaking down words into parts such as syllables and phonetic sounds, children are challenged to learn through transactions with the world around them — listening, interpreting, incorporating language in a more natural way” (Davenport and Jones n.p.). The reform was enacted, but the results were less than what was expected. While the reform did not necessarily positively impact student literacy—students’ scores actually dropped dramatically—California’s reform influenced education policies of other states and impacted textbook publishing as well (Davenport and Jones n.p.).

In 1983, the Reagan Administration published *A Nation at Risk*, a report that drew the public eye again towards education’s responsibility in promoting literacy. The results of this report cast scrutiny on education’s performance (Naumann n.p.). In 1987, further perpetuating the rising alarm over the poor literacy of Americans, television icon Oprah Winfrey aired an episode on her talk show where she featured a panel of illiterate Americans (Krashen ix). What resulted was increased vast media attention to the illiteracy of Americans, again heightening the alarm and instigating the literacy crisis. Responding to the panic, in 1994 President Bill Clinton issued Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which instituted nationwide testing in order to evaluate the reading and math skills of American students (Naumann n.p.). According to Mary T. Naumann, it was at this point that literacy education was added to the responsibilities of national politics as school boards alone had not made sufficient progress.

President George W. Bush’s initiative to address child literacy in the 2000 presidential campaign was marked by its transference of literacy from a predominantly educational concern to a political and national one. “After decades of debate inside the educational community, literacy policy has recently moved to the larger stage of national politics” (Davenport and Jones

n.p.). In 2002, President Bush implemented the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), greatly impacting literacy and education as schools were now held accountable for ensuring the literacy of each student. As opposed to Superintendent Honig's attempt at a philosophical education reform, President Bush's policy was based on a new methodology as well as accountability. Prior to the NCLB act, it was common for children, especially minority children, to slip through the cracks as far as literacy was concerned. The failure of education to ensure the literacy of every child proved problematic in eliminating illiteracy in America, which had historically always been more of an issue for minority groups (National Center for Education Statistics). In "The Politics of Literacy," David Davenport and Jeffrey M. Jones trace this transition of literacy becoming a national responsibility. Davenport and Jones describe the rhetoric of President Bush as transforming the problem of literacy into what is now commonly referred to as a literacy crisis: "Literacy is not merely a problem now; it is a crisis. Improving literacy is not just an educational or social need; it is essential if the United States is to compete in the new global economy" (n.p.).

As the National Assessment of Adult Literacy demonstrates, the percentage of illiterate adults in America has decreased significantly from the end of the 19th century (from 20.0 percent in 1870 to 0.6 percent in 1979). From the minimal percentage of adults who can now be classified as illiterate, it can be concluded that at least in the United States illiteracy no longer seems to be the issue. Stephen Krashen argues that the problem now is that many people are literate in only the most basic sense. Krashen describes Americans as being complacent with basic, or functional literacy, which describes the condition where individuals are satisfied with the knowing just enough of how to read and write to get by, i.e., sign their names or read road signs (ix). As Naumann reports, "both NAEP and PISA indicate that only three out of 10 U.S.

students are proficient readers — that is, they competently read and understand texts,” yet there appears to be a lack of initiative to achieve a higher level of literacy that surpasses the basics of reading and writing. It is the higher levels of literacy that produce the social and cognitive benefits associated with literacy.

Finally, it is from functionally literate individuals that a newer issue has emerged, one that Latty Goodwin calls “the invisible epidemic” (3). This condition, aliteracy, as it has come to be known, continues to challenge educators and frustrate workplaces. Aliteracy undermines the very benefits that literacy produces by fossilizing a basic level of skills that over time become archaic and inhibit the individual as well as the society in which they participate. In the following chapter I will define aliteracy as it has come to be known, as well as explicate the results of numerous studies and surveys portraying the detrimental effects of such a condition. From this framework, I will examine the results of surveys that suggest a large portion of college students can be classified as aliterate, and I will discuss the ramifications of such a diagnosis. Lastly, I will call into question the very definition of literacy in order to determine whether college students are aliterate or if they are in fact participating in a new type of literacy.

CHAPTER THREE: ALITERACY

Mark Twain once said, "The man who does not read good books has no advantage over the man who cannot read them" (qtd. in Weeks). For many years the literacy of the general public has caused concern, especially in America. In retrospect one can see numerous eras during which the literacy levels of the American people has caught the eye of authoritative bodies who realized that individuals must be literate to be able to function at their optimal potential. While functional academic literacy has been significantly emphasized recently by political and educational institutions, a different type of literacy problem has emerged. Research has found that a number of Americans have become complacent with attaining only "basic literacy" skills while neglecting to practice more complex literacy skills (Krashen, *The Power of Reading*). Stephen Krashen, as well as a number of other scholars, argue that attaining only basic literacy is problematic as "many people clearly don't read and write well enough to handle the complex literacy demands of modern society" (*The Power of Reading* ix). As our society relies heavily on increasingly complex literacy skills, having only basic literacy skills—while better than no literacy skills at all—may still render individuals incapable of completing tasks that require more advanced literacy. It is not illiteracy that is the focus here, but that literate individuals only function at minimal levels of literacy, inhibiting them from operating at their full potential. Aliteracy, which I will discuss more in depth in the following sections, has recently received much of the blame for stagnating literacy skills that threaten the goals for a highly literate society. Moreover, aliteracy occurs in every demographic, including college students, and it is this growing rate of aliteracy in the university that has recently begun to cause much alarm amongst educators and professionals.

Definition of Aliteracy

Larry Mikulecky is attributed with first distinguishing aliteracy from illiteracy in 1978. Aliteracy, as defined by Mikulecky, arises when “capable readers...regularly [choose] not to read” (“Aliteracy” 2). This condition is significant in that it deviates from the traditional focus on the capability of individuals to read and looks rather at the reading practices of the literate. Mikulecky argues that aliteracy results when an over-emphasis is placed on functional or basic literacy skills (“Aliteracy” 5). For example, Mikulecky claims that while ensuring the ability of Americans to read “basic” documents such as maps and applications, educational institutions have neglected to foster the literacy *habits* that will enable students to improve their literacy skills over their lifetime (“Aliteracy” 5). Consequently, according to Mikulecky, “[An individual’s] aliteracy, or lack of the reading habit, may guarantee his continued, life-long functional illiteracy” (“Aliteracy” 6). That is, practicing only basic literacy may discourage reading habits that would foster complex literacy skills, rendering the individual only capable of performing those basic literacy tasks.

Since its conception in 1978, aliteracy’s definition has not been wholly agreed upon, which in turn affects the analysis of studies concerning aliteracy. Mikulecky’s definition of aliteracy, for instance, does not clarify whether the lack of regular reading habits should be understood as a lack of reading in general, including a disregard of required reading, or as a lack of what Krashen refers to as “free voluntary reading (FVR)” (*The Power of Reading* 1). Other researchers dealing with aliteracy also fail to elucidate whether aliteracy refers to a lack of reading in general or a lack of voluntary reading only (Beers; Decker; Ramsay; Scott; Thimmesch). For example, G. Kylene Beers, who has extensively studied aliteracy amongst

adolescents, defines aliteracy loosely as “the group of people who can read but do not” for the purposes of her studies, yet fails to make the distinction of what type of reading she considers (“No Time Part 1” 30). Harris and Hodge additionally provide a broad definition of aliteracy in their dictionary of reading related terms; according to Harris and Hodge, aliteracy is generally defined as a “lack of the reading habit; especially, such a lack in capable readers who choose not to read” (11).

Krashen, however, clearly relates the problem of aliteracy to a neglect of voluntary reading. Although individuals might read what is required of them, to Krashen this does not constitute successful literacy habits. On the contrary, he argues that it is the reading that individuals do voluntarily that are most important to consider here. Therefore, for Krashen’s purpose, an individual’s continual reading of materials that are integral to their job or education do not factor into their literacy status. This reading habit would actually support functional literacy practices where individuals only read what is necessary to function at work, which Krashen claims leads to the aliterate condition. On the contrary, it is voluntary reading habits that truly influence the potential literate abilities of an individual. Like Krashen, Jude D. Gallik maintains that aliteracy is contingent upon voluntary reading habits. In his study of aliteracy in the university, Gallik looks specifically at the recreational reading habits of college students to assess their status as literates. According to Gallik, voluntary reading habits are indicative of literacy-related outcomes. Recreational reading habits in particular are so important in an individual’s life that he argues that “knowing about students’ recreational reading habits is helpful in making predictions about their future academic success” (488). Furthermore, Gallik

purports that recreational reading habits positively correlate with grade point averages and writing skills.

In their examination of whether the United States should be considered a progressively aliterate society, librarians Anne Salter and Judith Brook make a distinction between the reading of texts and literature. Like Krashen and Galik, Salter and Brook constitute aliteracy as the condition of literate individuals choosing not to read voluntarily; however, they take the definition of aliteracy one step further in speculating as to what is considered approved voluntary reading material. Referring to a study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), *Reading at Risk*, Salter and Brook argue that the definition of aliteracy used in such studies only account for a classical definition of literary reading that entails genres such as novels and short stories (29). According to Salter and Brook, the very definition of reading influences the assessment of literacy. If the NEA's narrow definition of reading dominates studies, then reading habits are in fact in decline as fewer individuals voluntarily read short stories or novels in comparison with the similar past statistics (31). However, when other texts are included in reading surveys—required and technological texts not included in the NEA's narrow definition—Salter and Brook argue that reading in general is actually increasing (31): “Thus, reading surveys generally indicate that literary reading in the strict sense of the NEA definition has decreased, while reading in general has increased” (31).

As one can see, the definition of aliteracy directly affects the conclusions drawn about its prevalence. For the sake of this study, I will regard aliteracy as Mikulecky originally defined it—as a general lack of reading habits, both voluntary and involuntary, amongst capable readers, which, as I will discuss in the following section, can be caused by a number of factors.

Causes of Aliteracy

As more American citizens achieve functional literacy, the number of individuals who lack the motivation to practice more complex functions of literacy becomes more obvious. Recent scholarship attempts to answer why an increasing percentage of the American population falls ill to the aliteracy epidemic. Thus far, blame for this condition has been placed on a number of suspects: education, the individuals themselves, parents, government, and technology, to name a few. In the following sections I will explore recent theories that consider various institutions' responsibilities for the aliteracy epidemic.

Education's Role in Aliteracy

Many have held the education system responsible for molding the reading habits of young citizens. Mikulecky, for example, publicly questioned the role of public formal education in developing reading habits amongst students at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association in 1978 ("Aliteracy"). At that time, many Americans felt that education and teachers were failing to prepare students for literacy-related demands, and many of these same feelings remain today (Allen; Davenport and Jones; Kirsch et al.; "The Literacy Crisis"). Mikulecky maintains that in fostering functional literacy in minimum standards programs, educators have failed to properly instill reading habits that enable individuals to surpass functional literacy ("Aliteracy" 6). Pedagogies do not always emphasize reading as habit or concern themselves with whether students will continue to read beyond the required reading tasks, but rather stress reading for the purposes of passing the course and getting by in life

(“Aliteracy” 5). Mikulecky warns that this proves problematic because literacy standards continually change and rise in concordance with changes in society (Brandt 2), so in simply meeting the minimal standards of one decade, an individual will be unprepared to meet the increasingly complex standards required of the next (“Aliteracy”). Thus, while ensuring that everyone has the ability to practice basic literacy (reading and writing at a low academic level), an integral part of fostering optimal literacy practices is absent.

One of the reasons for aliteracy is that reading is oftentimes not presented to students as a pleasurable activity. Educators all too often present reading as a task to be associated with mind-numbing drills and time-consuming book reports. John G. Ramsay represents a number of scholars who argue this position in his article “Hell’s Bibliophiles: The Fifth Way of Looking at an Aliterate.” In his article, Ramsay posits that formal education often does not teach literacy, particularly reading, in a way that is enjoyable for students. Like Ramsay, Cunningham and Stanovich agree that students do not relish the reading experience because it is not rewarding and is oftentimes void of meaning, perpetuating aliteracy: “Thus, reading for meaning is hindered, unrewarding reading experiences multiply, and practice is avoided or merely tolerated without real cognitive involvement” (Cunningham and Stanovich, “Early Reading Acquisition” 934). In an address at a symposium dedicated to aliteracy, John Campbell highlights psychological satisfaction as a key in promoting reading to students. Studies find that as children, aliterates did not have many enjoyable experiences with reading, so Campbell suggests that teachers should provide opportunities for students to enjoy reading without the overarching concern of being tested on the material. Barbara Cooper Decker, in her article “Aliteracy: What Teachers Can Do to Keep Johnny Reading,” reports the positive results of such practices overseas. Two countries

with high percentages of avid readers, Greece and New Zealand, strive to promote the enjoyment of reading by eliminating worksheets. In lieu of reading drills, the educational institutions in these countries focus on pleasure reading, discussion, and reflection through writing in class, and as a result they report high percentages of dedicated young readers (Decker 56).

Drawing from her research concerning literacy instruction overseas, Decker agrees that emphasizing reading as a meaningful activity as opposed to teaching reading as solely definition and memorization-based might positively impact literacy practices. The pressure of testing steals from the pleasure of reading, instilling a negative view and working against Krashen's aim to promote frequent voluntary reading. In an effort to eliminate illiteracy and raise test scores as a result of the literacy crisis and the back-to-the-basics movement, an unbalanced amount of attention in education has been placed upon reading skills as opposed to reading habits (Goodwin; Lange; Leftig; Mikulecky). Robert Leftig captures the heart of the argument in his article "After Basics":

If anything, the basics movement has aggravated the problem, and the result has been a rise in *aliteracy*, an ability to understand the written word only in bits and pieces of isolated sentences in grammar or punctuation exercises and an inability to gain from a creative sequence of related sentences any aesthetic experience. (47)

Because of the emphasis on skills, students begin to equate reading with comprehension and vocabulary drills rather than with positive reading experiences; hence, an increasing number of students fall victim to aliteracy as functional literacy is emphasized in American pedagogies.

The feelings teachers themselves have for reading has additionally been attributed to the spread of aliteracy (Applegate and Applegate; Decker; Frager). In their study of pre-service

teachers' attitudes toward reading, Applegate and Applegate propose that student attitude toward reading is often affected by that of the teacher. According to Applegate and Applegate, teacher attitude toward reading, whether enthusiastic or unenthusiastic, is obvious to students: "One interesting finding was that the attitude toward reading of many teachers was relatively transparent to their students" (561). Decker cites the reason for this in her article: "Unfortunately, many teachers also are found in the aliterate society, and, as a result, they cannot teach a love for reading because it is something that they have not experienced" (57). In his study of aliterate teachers, Alan Frager also assumes that teachers' values influence their students; if teachers enjoy reading, teaching pleasurable reading comes naturally, and vice versa. Moreover, while a number of scholars agree that teacher attitude can influence younger readers, Applegate and Applegate also propose that a reader's attitude toward reading is still somewhat pliable in college, so a teacher's attitude can still have a great influence on their students in higher education: "College can provide both powerful and proximate experiences that can affect a student's perspective on reading" (560). Ron Tanner emphasizes the importance of utilizing freshmen English courses as unique platforms for promoting reading because, as Tanner puts it, "The composition class may be our students' last chance to find a way into the world of reading" (9).

In his article "Encouraging the Lifetime Reading Habit," Joseph Sanacore re-emphasizes the necessity for schools, specifically teachers, to promote reading since parents may or may not promote it at home. Although time may be limited in a classroom, Sanacore argues that teachers need to allot class time for reading each day. Sanacore suggests that teachers should further model reading for their students since simply instructing them to take time to read is oftentimes

not enough: “Our students will consider their reading immersion to be more important if they see us [educators] demonstrating the joy of reading too” (475). Similar to Applegate and Applegate and Fraser, Sanacore seems to suggest again that the value a teacher places on reading will transfer to students. The teacher plays a vital role in the development of a lifelong learner; they equip students with literacy skills they will need later on, and they are in a unique position to teach the pleasure of reading, which students might fail to discover on their own.

Beyond teacher attitudes and drill-based reading activities, other education-related experiences have received blame for contributing to aliteracy over the past few decades. Carlsen and Sherril’s collection of reading autobiographies provide us with rich testimonies in which we find other factors associated with education experiences that individuals attribute to aliteracy. One of the aliterates describes to Carlsen and Sherril the embarrassment of reading in front of the classroom. She directly blames these uncomfortable occurrences for her lack of reading. Apparently the shame she accrued from those experiences transferred to her individual reading experience, causing her to shy away from reading at all.

Another popular reason for aliteracy mentioned in Carlsen and Sherril’s collection is that the books that were pushed onto students were ones that they found irrelevant or uninteresting. Individuals report that they were unable to connect with reading because they never experienced a book that interested them. Donald R. Gallo’s article “How Classics Create an Aliterate Society” deals with this problem extensively. It is Gallo’s argument that classical literature is forced on students too early, before classical literature is truly relevant to student lives. The situations and characters portrayed in classical literature oftentimes do not obviously resemble those of the students; thus, the students are unable to make a connection to the texts. Because of

this, Gallo argues that many students find reading to be distant from their lives and to be a laborious task. Gallo provides his own personal experience of being turned off to reading in high school due to a premature exposure to classical literature. He explains that as he entered college, however, he learned to appreciate the classics more as they became more relevant to his own personal experiences, which in turn caused him to begin to read voraciously. It is his hypothesis that if students would be allowed to choose texts that are more relevant to their lives and experiences, that students might make reading a frequent habit as they would find it rewarding and enjoyable. Thus, Gallo declares decidedly that the top goal of every English course should be to foster a love of reading, even if that means allowing students to read untraditional texts (35).

Latty Goodwin takes an interesting perspective in the discussion of education's role in creating aliterates. Goodwin interviewed seven psychology students in efforts to determine why they not only failed to read voluntarily, but also failed to read texts required for their courses. Students admit that they have never really enjoyed reading, which many of them feel guilty for, despite positive childhood experiences. These students also report that they have managed to get by without reading throughout their school years while still receiving passing grades. Goodwin expected to find in her study that instead of reading, students spend their free time watching television or socializing. Surprisingly, students report that they do not actually spend much time watching television or other being involved in other activities that are commonly blamed for aliteracy. Most of the students actually report that their leisure time is frequently spent working to pay for their schooling; thus, they do not have time to read even what was required of them.

For this, similar to Ira Shor, Goodwin places some of the blame for aliteracy on the structure of institutions themselves.

While the majority of the cited authors lean towards a new structure for instruction in reading, one that varies from the now rigid, teacher-oriented, drills and skills-based reading instruction, Vincent Reed sees the responsibility of schools differently. In his address at the AEI Symposia of 1984, Reed states that it is not so much that schools require a type of reading that turns students off to reading, but that schools do not require enough reading (“The Role of Schools”). Reed recognizes that many aliterates might find it difficult to comprehend what they read, and his theory is that with more reading and skills taught in the classroom, an eventual value for reading will develop (“The Role of Schools” 43). His theory, however, would most likely be contested by Ron Tanner. In Tanner’s paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication, he stresses that students cannot be forced to read—they have most likely developed an aversion to reading over a span of years. Teachers should instead strive to help students enjoy reading and create opportunities for students to rediscover a love for it.

The way literacy is presented to students in the classroom may further influence their reading habits. Teacher-driven instruction in literacy-related activities might actually work against the type of experiences that encourage reading. Maria F. Janney, advocate of language arts reform, proposes that reading be taught according to a social-constructivist position to foster an engagement with reading, a theory that falls in line with what is commonly known as reader-response theory. As explained by Robert E. Probst, Professor of English Education at Georgia State University, reader-response theory has the potential to create positive reading habits

amongst students who dislike reading (37). By allowing students to first experience a text, to decide on a meaning for themselves that connects to their own personal experiences, reader-response theory avoids imposing an established interpretation on students that might discourage students who are unable to come upon that interpretation themselves (38). As Louise Rosenblatt, a proponent of reader-response theory, argues, this type of reading instruction allows for an aesthetic experience with reading that may draw students to continue to read. Moreover, Probst argues that this type of reading instruction actually leads to more complex literacy skills. In addition to learning about themselves and others, students learn to consider how texts influence their emotions and their reactions and how context greatly influences the reading of a text (40).

Allowing students to provide their own interpretation for books of their preference might instill a more positive experience with reading that teaches complex literacy skills that will carry on beyond the classroom. Like Gallo, Janney believes that moving away from tests and drills and allowing students to choose their own books for class and to find meaning in text first followed by analysis of how that meaning is made will stimulate life-long readers rather than the aliterates produced by the language arts classroom now. Similar to Janney who advocates language arts reform, Tanner proposes that authoritarian teachers who impose literary interpretations on students can in fact lead students to aliteracy. Conversely, Tanner suggests that students should be allowed to draw their own interpretations from literature. In giving them freedom in interpretation and reading choices, they are more likely to enjoy reading (9). The solution for Tanner and Janney is not more required reading, but a reform of how literacy is taught.

The Individual's Role in Aliteracy

Two critical studies have shaped the view that many researchers have developed regarding aliterates. One such study, conducted in 1996 by G. Kylene Beers, Professor of Reading at the University of Houston, was of the first to suggest that aliterates should not all be categorized together. After studying two seventh grade classrooms for the duration of one year, Beers notes that those who can be classified aliterate are not homogeneous in their experiences with and attitudes toward reading. According to Beers, differences between non-readers place them into one of three categories: dormant readers, uncommitted readers, and unmotivated readers.

Dormant readers as described by Beers are individuals who actually find reading enjoyable, but who do not read for pleasure usually due to a lack of time because of sports, school assignments, or work. Muhammad, a participant who Beers classifies as a dormant reader, says that he doesn't read because in the neighborhood where he lives, reading is regarded as a distasteful hobby. Although Muhammad actually enjoys reading, he would stand to lose something in his community if he were to be seen as a reader: "If I get caught doin' that reading' stuff, I'm a member of the brain gang and that gang don't last long in my neighborhood. It don't last long at all" (Beers, "Part 1" 30). The second category of aliterates, uncommitted readers, differs from dormant readers in that they view reading as a skill, not as a pleasure. To them reading is a required activity; albeit, they are not completely hostile towards reading. One such uncommitted reader in Beers' study, Burt, dislikes reading because he is unable to enjoy an aesthetic experience with text, which is most likely a result of him relegating reading to a skill void of pleasure ("Part 1" 32). Quite different from dormant and uncommitted readers, Beers

reports a third category into which aliterates may fall: unmotivated readers. It is this type of aliterate who often serves as the face of aliteracy. Unmotivated readers, according to Beers, find reading to be boring and in most cases dislike it. They do not see the value nor do they see the appeal of reading. What sets them apart from uncommitted readers, though, is the attitude they have toward reading and those who read. Unmotivated readers, according to Beers, harbor negative feelings toward reading and those who read (“Part 1” 33).

In classifying the types of aliterates, Beers shifted the focus of aliteracy studies toward unique individual experiences with reading. Moreover, she paved the way for further research that would explore the intricacies of aliteracy as opposed to making general assumptions about aliterates as a whole. Understanding the uniqueness of aliterates themselves, Beers maintains, is essential for discovering the root of the aliteracy problem:

I came to realize there is no single template for the aliterate student. The term aliterates should not call to mind a mass of students who dislike reading, but instead individuals with differing views about themselves, about others, and about reading. By understanding those views, we can come closer to understanding why some students choose not to read. (“Part 1” 33)

Similar to the work of Beers, John G. Ramsay’s study also divides aliterates into separate groups based on individual experiences and feelings toward reading. Like Beers, Ramsay determines that the treatment of aliterates oftentimes depends on the definition ascribed to them (52). He suggests that blindly categorizing non-readers as “aliterate” without investigating the reason that they do not read is misleading in developing proper strategies for instilling good reading habits amongst them. Educators may be led to shirk the responsibility of instilling good reading habits

in aliterates if they view all aliterates as a group of neglectful and irresponsible individuals with no hope of a more positive view and practice of reading. Some non-readers may genuinely dislike reading (unmotivated readers), but both Beers and Ramsay indicate that there are others who simply do not have the time for it and so cannot read frequently. Furthermore, other aliterates may actually have specific cognitive difficulties with reading. They may be unable to comprehend what is being read, which contributes to their aliteracy. Understanding why individuals do not read is integral to combating the problem.

While some may still view aliterates as simply those who irresponsibly waste their ability to read, Ramsay calls researchers to take a closer look at aliterates' aversion to reading in order to develop strategies for fostering a good reading habit. Ramsay describes a type of aliterate who experiences difficulty imagining what they read; they do not read because to them reading is only the gathering of information from a page. These aliterates may not have the ability to create images of what they read in their minds, consequently turning them off to what they consider a menial task. This type of aliterate coincides with Beers' description of unmotivated readers like Katy. In Beers' study, Katy describes reading as boring, and she expresses her confusion and dismay over students who "get emotional" over a book ("Part 1" 33). According to Beers, Katy is an aliterate because of her inability to "experience" a text:

Reading was boring to Katy because the words didn't form images in her mind. Just as listening to a television show without seeing the picture would eventually cause most people to turn the TV off, reading without images caused Katy to turn reading off. ("Part 1" 33)

As seen with Katy's account, the inability to "experience" a text may contribute to an individual's aliteracy.

Researchers like Beers and Ramsay argue that it is problematic to use an umbrella definition when describing aliteracy. Ramsay argues that such a broad definition that fails to recognize individual issues with reading inhibits researchers from developing a solution to the problem: "The very word aliteracy is a charge of indifference, self-absorption, or insularity" (52). And when this view of aliterates dominates, then individuals like Muhammad, individuals who report that they do not read because they do not have the time to read or because their social status may be negatively impacted by reading, are not fully understood or considered. Beers and Ramsay provide persuasive arguments that aliteracy may result from more than a lack of motivation or indifference; sometimes aliteracy may be greatly impacted by outside factors (Beers, "Part 1" 31). Most importantly, these other aliterates may require different strategies if they are to develop a good reading habit or at the very least an appreciation for reading.

Technology's Role in Aliteracy

While scholars like Mikulecky blame education for the rise in aliteracy, other scholars and institutions target technological advancements as responsible for the decrease in avid readers. Building on the ground laid by Mikulecky, a symposium was assembled in 1984 in which guests from academia, electronic media, and print media came together to discuss this growing epidemic (Thimmesch). Representative of a common concern developing at the time, the rise of technology and entertainment was blamed for the decline in print sales and in reading

habits (Allen and Inglusrud; Corder; Deekle; Maeroff; Pascarella and Terenzini United States). Presenters at the symposium purported that people preferred not to buy or read physical texts (i.e., newspapers or books) when other, more aesthetically pleasing and easily accessible media that departed from the traditional practice of reading words on a page for information were available for the same entertainment and information (Reed; Thimmesch). One such presenter at the symposium, Vincent Reed, cites television as a reason that aliteracy runs rampant because it competes for an individual's attention. The 2004 study of the state of reading conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) also indicates that technology holds some responsibility for aliteracy. The NEA states in *Reading at Risk* that "the decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices" (United States, *Reading at Risk* xii).

The NEA published a subsequent report in 2007 describing the then current state of reading in America (United States, *To Read*). Among the results that show a definite decline in recreational reading amongst Americans, the NEA reports in *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* that reading often competes with and loses out to technology and the media. One result in the report attests that over half of middle and high school students "use other media while reading," including television, video games, and the internet (United States, *To Read* 10). According the NEA, "This multi-tasking suggests less focused engagement with a text" (*To Read* 10), so even when students are reading, which has already been shown to occur less and less frequently, students are not fully engaged with what they are reading.

Librarian Jack W. Humphrey assumes an interesting stance towards technology's role in aliteracy. According to Humphrey, the media centers of schools have become so preoccupied

with the latest technology that print books have been overlooked. Contemporary books that might attract students are unavailable to them, and many times reading that would interest students is not promoted. Humphrey points out the paradox of schools verbally “promoting” books but spending funds on new electronic media. This, he states, sends mixed signals to students as to the actual value of reading, again contributing to the aliteracy epidemic.

Technology and the media have received their share of criticism in contributing to the aliteracy problem in America; however, a good amount of recent research has refuted a number of these concerns. In Goodwin’s study of why psychology students do not read the required texts for class, she was somewhat surprised to find that students did not attribute watching television as to why they do not read. Likewise, in Gallik’s examination of students’ recreational reading habits, he cites Greaney and Hegarty’s 1987 finding that “no relationship [existed] between amount of time spent watching television and amount of time spent reading books” (481). These findings have led even Krashen to conclude that television does not necessarily negatively affect reading habits (*The Power of Reading* 78). Thus, technology may not be the biggest culprit in the problem of aliteracy as it may have once been believed to be. And in light of untraditional literacies such as digital literacies, which I will discuss later, technology may actually support and encourage literate activities.

Parents’ Role in Aliteracy

Karen Gersten claims that culture is the biggest influence on a person’s literacy. In her article “A Model of Adult Literacy: Implications for Educational Change,” Gersten argues that families are influenced by community values, and this carries over into whether or not literacy is

encouraged in a household. Shirley Brice Heath's ethnographic study of the literacy practices of two towns, Trackton and Roadville, supports Gersten's claim. Heath observed that Roadville parents sought to provide their children with the ability to move beyond the small town. As such, they viewed education as an important factor in preparing their children for future success. Due to their belief in education, they restricted their children from working during their school years so that they could focus on their learning. Morality was also an important cultural value for the town of Roadville, and literacy served the additional role of instilling these morals as literacy often has throughout history (Graff). In Heath's observations, the literacy of Roadville children appeared to be encouraged more than was the literacy of the Trackton children. While Trackton parents also hoped that their children would achieve more than they had been able to, their actions demonstrated a different value placed on education and literacy. Unlike Roadville children, Trackton children were expected to work and support their families while still in school, taking away from the time that they could devote to literacy. Furthermore, more emphasis seemed to be placed on oral abilities for success in Trackton. The ability to be a good storyteller seemed to be of higher value than the ability to read; thus, more attention was paid to developing this talent in Trackton homes than was given to reading. We can see that in Heath's accounts the two towns appeared to place different values on literacy, and these were reflected in the amount and type of encouragement given to literacy-related activities in the home.

Since many early literacy practices begin in the home, parents have also received part of the blame for the increase in aliteracy. Studies like those conducted by Heath support the argument that the home environment can either support or inhibit the level of childhood literacy. Research finds that early literacy models such as teachers and parents especially can have

profound influences on a person's literacy development (Lange). Lynda Hawkes, for example, found a number of common experiences specifically related to parental participation in literacy development that may have influenced the aliteracy of her four participants. In her study of four aliterate professionals—a lawyer, an engineer, a school psychologist, and a reading recovery teacher—Hawkes found that not one of them remembered being read to as a child. The parents of the professionals did not encourage literacy in the home, but allowed their children to fill their time with other activities. The participants all admit having never learned to connect meaning with words, which Hawkes posits correlates with the lack of reading encouragement from their parents. She suggests that the lack of reading encouragement from their parents inhibited the participants' ability to generate meaning from text, resulting in or at least contributing to their aliteracy. Furthermore, Hawkes reports that the participants admit that they do not push reading on their own children as they found that they were able to succeed while avoiding reading. This finding suggests a cyclical effect in literacy encouragement: children of parents who did not encourage reading may in turn not encourage their own children to read.

While Hawkes' study insinuates that a lack of parental encouragement in a child's reading habits may result in aliteracy, these conclusions seem hypothetical at best in light of other research, which I will examine in the next section. Spratt, Seckinger, and Wagner also express uncertainty in making such assumptions. In their study of the literacy of Moroccan citizens they report the following:

That neither parental education nor socio-economic status was found to be substantially correlated with either household or school literacy skills may be a function of opposing factors in the Moroccan setting. Although educated parents may provide a beneficial

model of literacy in action, families headed by unschooled parents are more likely to depend on the literacy skills of their children, creating a practical motivation for the children to exercise such skills, and a context in which to do so. (192-93).

This study suggests that parents without much education might depend more on the literate abilities of their children, which might in turn motivate their children to become more literate. However, Sprat, Seckinger, and Wagner's study does not firmly support the position that literacy skills are best when modeled by parents. Other studies report contradictory results in a number of participants. From this and similar studies we find that while parental education or the encouragement of parents may positively affect a child's literacy development and vice versa, this correlation is not certain.

Prevalence of Aliteracy

The benefits of literacy have already been cited in the previous chapter. To review, literacy enhances vocabulary acquisition, expands declarative knowledge, improves critical thinking skills, establishes lifelong learning, and enables social and economic advancements for an individual. Hence, as Mikulecky states, aliteracy is problematic because it inhibits individuals from functioning at their fullest potential in a society that continually increases its literacy demands ("Aliteracy"). Understanding aliteracy, then, is of the utmost importance as aliteracy not only affects individuals on numerous levels, but because aliteracy as an epidemic in turn has a negative impact on society.

In attempts to combat this epidemic, researchers have attempted to understand the causes of aliteracy. As discussed, many factors and institutions have received blame for enabling aliteracy. In many of the studies mentioned, aliterates were assumed to be one homogeneous group of individuals who chose to neglect literacy habits. A few researchers like Beers and Ramsay, however, have come to the conclusion that aliterates need to be understood on an individual basis in order to truly understand what causes aliteracy and how prevalent it actually is. Other scholars have moved on to study different demographics affected by aliteracy, one of whom is Ronald Lange who surveyed elementary children in an attempt to discover when people begin to identify themselves as non-readers. Others like Donald Gallo have focused on adolescents' dislike of reading while probing for strategies to instill an enjoyment of reading before leaving high school. Lynda Hawkes' examination of aliterates in professional occupations has found that her participants were part of professions that required reading, but that they have all found ways around it, seemingly defying the notion that reading could assist their careers at all. Still other research has targeted an aliterate population that would be expected to be avid readers—teachers. Alarming, research has found that a large number of teachers do not read voluntarily, and their feelings toward it consequently transfer to their students (Decker; Frager; Nathanson, Pruslow, and Levitt). Like the professionals interviewed by Hawkes, teachers apparently do not see a lack of reading habits as detrimental to themselves or to their students.

Most alarming are the published findings that purport the prevalence of aliteracy over the last few decades. According to a number of scholars, this epidemic is widespread. In Boorstin's report on the condition of literacy in America, he reiterates two studies conducted by the Book Industry Study Group (BISG) in 1978 and 1983. After conducting 1,450 in-depth interviews,

these studies confirmed that one-half of Americans are not readers, meaning that they have not read one book in the past six months (Boorstin 16). The 2004 report published by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), *Reading at Risk*, supports this finding. A survey of over 17,000 American adults showed that only 46.7 percent of American adults read literature, a dramatic drop of 10.2 percent in just twenty years (United States, *Reading at Risk* ix). While the percentage of adults who read at all is reportedly decreasing at a slower rate with 56.6 percent claiming to have read any type of book in 2002 (United States, *Reading at Risk* ix), the results are disheartening nonetheless, especially when the National Center for Education Statistics reports that “between 40 and 44 million adults nationwide [demonstrate] skills in the lowest literacy level defined” (Kirsch et al. xvi). The results of *Reading at Risk* also seem to conclusively demonstrate that reading is on the decline in every demographic: all education levels, all age groups, all ethnicities, and both genders. Most importantly for this study, reports indicate that aliteracy is on the increase in American universities. The next chapter will take a closer look at these studies and explore the implications of a group of aliterate professionals-in-training.

CHAPTER FOUR: ALITERATE COLLEGE STUDENTS

Recent studies suggest that a high percentage of college students do not read regularly and should be considered aliterate, a disconcerting fact for educators (Baer, Cook, and Baldi; Goodwin; Nathanson, Pruslow, and Levitt; Salter and Brook). As frequent voluntary reading (FVR) has been connected with high levels of performance in other areas, it is expected that college students as professionals-in-training should practice literacy beyond the functional level. College students are expected to not only read what is required for their courses, but moreover they must be able to read advanced texts critically (Wambach). Fulfilling these expectations becomes problematic, however, when a large number of college students can in fact be classified as aliterates. Furthermore, the lack of reading habit amongst college students suggests that they will not read beyond their college years, which has possible implications for their success in future professions and their participation in civic activities.

Reading Expectations

College faculties hold high expectations for the reading abilities and habits of their students. Catherine A. Wambach, associate professor at the University of Minnesota, sums up many of these expectations in her article “Reading and Writing Expectations at a Research University.” In order to examine faculty expectations “regarding students' skills and content knowledge and the kinds of reading and writing tasks they expect students to complete,” Wambach surveyed 84 faculty members in the arts and sciences who teach first and second year courses. From the completed surveys Wambach found that a large number of instructors (73%)

expect students to have already developed critical reading skills prior to entering their courses. Furthermore, the majority of instructors (80%) require readings from course textbooks throughout the semester with an additional 15% of instructors requiring reading outside of the text (i.e., magazines and study guides) to complement student learning. Faculty from various disciplines provide a variety of reasons that these readings are essential to student learning: math and social science faculty state that the readings serve to familiarize students with lessons prior to class time, science faculty claim the readings assist students to “acquire knowledge,” and humanities faculty argue that the reading teaches students to “exercise critical thinking, analytical thinking, [and to] develop healthy skepticism.” Moreover, 90% of the instructors surveyed strongly believe that students will be incapable of passing their courses without reading, a statistic that perhaps best demonstrates just how important a role reading plays in the expectations instructors have for their students.

Students have their own expectations for reading in college. In an attempt to better understand the expectations they have as well as their reading background, Keflyn X. Reed of Bishop State Community College administered a survey to 226 students who were enrolled in reading courses at the same college in 1994 (“An Analysis and Discussion” 3). From the results, Reed finds that the students enrolled in Bishop State Community College’s reading courses report relatively positive experiences with reading from textbooks (42%), and that throughout the specific reading course in which they were enrolled 46% of participants aspired to improve their reading comprehension with another 36% hoping to improve their vocabulary (“An Analysis and Discussion” 5). Many participants (56%) reported a belief that they should be able to read faster and indicated that they expected to learn to do so at college (“An Analysis and Discussion” 6).

From Reed's study we see that college students entertain their own expectations concerning college's influence on their reading skills and habits. In general, they appear to assume reading's central role in their studies, and they expect that college will help them hone their reading abilities. While Reed's results may not adequately reflect the reading expectations of college students in general due to the very specific demographic of students surveyed, the results may prove helpful in understanding on a small scale some of the initial attitudes students hold toward their reading abilities and habits while in college.

Reading appears to be a vital part of the learning experience for college students. Peter Deekle, director of the honors program at Roger Williams University, describes reading as "a fundamental building block for a liberal education, providing a broad basis for knowledge and understanding" (264). In his article "Books, Reading, and Undergraduate Education," Deekle considers the benefits of incorporating multimedia literacy into pedagogy due to the younger generations' preference for new formats if that is what it takes to get them to read. Regardless of the format that the text takes, however, Deekle determines that the ability to read is the "most critical skill of lifelong learners" (268). Similarly, Fairbairn and Fairbairn emphasize the importance of reading in their book *Reading at University*. According to Fairbairn and Fairbairn, reading is vital in academic life because "they [academics] must read in order to become and remain aware of their subject, to keep their knowledge and understanding up to date, and to check their work and ideas and research against those of their peers" (3). Reading enables and augments learning in the university.

The relationship between reading and lifelong learning is one reason reading habits are stressed in studies concerning aliteracy. In questioning how reading can and should be integrated

into curriculums for education majors, Alan Frager explores the reading habits, or mostly lack thereof, practiced by pre-service teachers. Frager states that recreational reading is extremely important for pre-service teachers as it fosters the love for reading that propels students to read more (Frager 16; Sanacore). Furthermore, he stipulates that part of the recreational reading choices of pre-service teachers should be related to teaching as profession-related books help “pre-service and in-service teachers...to understand and actively participate in the current efforts to reform the teaching profession” (16). As it appears that many pre-service teachers do not actually read recreationally, or at least not consistently, Frager argues that reading should be implemented more into education curriculum, especially the reading of books related to specific professions (19). Frager postulates that requiring students to read more in their classes and to practice reading teaching-related texts would promote acquisition of the habit, which would then carry over into their careers, keeping them on the cutting edge of teaching-related theories and pedagogies.

Reading Habits

As of 2003, only 31% of 24.6 million college graduates could be constituted proficient in prose literacy, per the findings of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (15). For the purposes of their National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), the NCES regarded “proficient” as being able to read “lengthy, complex, abstract prose texts as well as [synthesize] information and ‘make’ complex inferences” (3). What this translates to is that a great number of college students who receive their degrees are still unable to perform some of the literacy-related

demands expected of them prior to graduating. Upon receiving a degree, only a little over a quarter of college students are able to comprehend and analyze complex texts.

Concerned by recent reports such as the one produced by the NCES, in 2006 two research librarians at Oglethorpe University and Mercer University, Atlanta administered a survey to 163 undergraduates inquiring of their reading habits. The two librarians, Anne Salter and Judith Brook, found results that complicated the simplified notion of an increasingly aliterate student population. Deciding on the definition of an aliterate as being “able to read but not interested in reading” (28), Salter and Brook asked students questions such as “In your spare time, which of the following are you most likely to do?” (34) and “How many hours per day do you spend on leisure reading?” (36) to determine students’ status as aliterates. When asked about the habits students engage in during their spare time, the most popular answer students gave was television viewing, which 72% of participants report engaging in, followed by “[hanging] out with friends” (69%) and napping (64%) (Salter and Brook 34). Fourth in frequency was reading, with 61% of students reporting that they read in their free time. From further questioning, Salter and Brook extrapolated that 44% of students read between two and four hours a day throughout the school year, but that the amount of time reading dramatically decreases during school breaks with 66% of students report reading less than one hour a day during that time (35).

These results led the researchers to conclude that “the responses of our students infer that students are most likely to read as a leisure activity when engaged in an academic setting and less likely to read outside that environment” (Salter and Brook 36). From the survey, 51% of participants reported that they read less than five books that are not academically related in a six month period, and another 14% of participants report that they do not read books at all (37). The

fact that a considerable number of students do not read many books that are not related to their studies indicates that these students will not continue to read beyond their time in the university. It appears that the students who reportedly read frequently while in school only do so because they feel that they must in order to succeed in their classes. And if Salter and Brook's finding that many students do not read at all during school breaks is any indication, it may be safe to say that once students are no longer required to read, they will not, hindering lifelong learning. This conclusion that students who read frequently while in school often do not read outside of school displaces the notion of continual life-long learning. Salter and Brook's study suggests that reading students will not continue to read beyond college, limiting their continued ability to learn from texts.

The recreational reading choices that students make are also of interest in Salter and Brook's study. Interestingly enough, it appears that the majority of reading that students engage in is the reading of magazines and newspapers, although it is unclear whether students are reading the print versions of these media or whether they are skimming online versions of the texts. Regardless of the medium, Salter and Brook's finding displaces *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* sweeping claim that the current generation does not read newspapers anymore (qtd. in Salter and Brook 36). The majority of participants, 77%, report that they read magazines or newspapers at least occasionally if not daily (Salter and Brook 36). The results of Salter and Brook's study indicate that although students might limit their recreational reading, at least at the two universities in question, the majority of students do read and "are quite well versed in terms of books, authors, and genres" (39). Despite the fact that the majority of students claimed to read at least a minimal amount, Salter and Brook posit that students can still be constituted aliterate

“in the sense that they prefer viewing [watching TV, videos, or DVDs] to reading as a spare time activity” (39). Likewise, a study conducted by Rosenheck et al. on the successfulness of the Accelerated Reader program in promoting reading and library use amongst fifth-graders also found that although students reportedly enjoy reading, they are likely to choose other activities such as listening to music or using the computer over reading in their spare time (26).

The traditional view of reading and literacy, which Salter and Brook insinuate is perhaps too narrow, may have a great impact on the study of aliteracy. As the results of Salter and Brook’s study demonstrate, students do read texts such as magazines and newspapers often, but this type of reading appears to be discounted as a legitimate reading activity, thus suggesting a higher rate of aliteracy than may actually exist. Abraham Willard’s study of the reading choices of over 1200 freshmen and seniors from nine universities confirms that students do read in a loose sense; Willard states that most of those students questioned claim to read recreationally two to eight hours a week, consistent with the general population, but when asked how many books they had read voluntarily during the two months prior to the study, the majority of students at five of the nine universities admitted to having read none (460). Thus, it is likely that the texts that students do read might not be considered the type of legitimate reading choices that count in aliteracy studies, perpetuating the proposed rate of aliteracy amongst students.

Kate Allen and John E. Ingulsrud, professors at two Japanese universities, describe a similar situation amongst Japanese students in their 2003 article “Manga Literacy: Popular Culture and the Reading Habits of Japanese College Students.” The aliteracy epidemic in Japan resembles the one plaguing American educators. With book sales declining and an obsession with technology on the rise, Japanese educators, government, and parents are concerned about

the implications: “Declining interest in reading is a matter of public concern for the highly literate culture of Japan” (Allen and Ingulsrud 674). Allen and Ingulsrud contend that although it appears that Japanese students are not reading as voraciously as they had previously or as they are expected to, students are actually devoutly reading another genre that is not considered “serious literature”: “Manga (Japanese comics) constitute the most popular kind of reading material in Japan. However, these texts are not accepted in schools because many parents and teachers believe reading manga is too easy and may have adverse effects” (Allen and Ingulsrud 674).

The reasoning behind discounting manga as a legitimate reading activity in Japan might echo the reasons that many American educators discount the reading of various texts in the studies of aliteracy in America. Japanese parents believe that manga “[dulls] readers’ minds, [makes] readers lazy,” and at least a small population of Japanese adults believes that it is a potential promoter of juvenile delinquency (Allen and Ingulsrud 677). Similarly, the reading of magazines and newspapers is many times discounted as legitimate reading choices in studies on aliteracy. The NEA, for example, considers only the reading of literature in their assessment of aliteracy, a specification that in itself is very vague and cancels out other genres that could still potentially benefit students.

The stigma associated with manga in Japan resembles that associated with young adult fiction and even comic books in America. Gallo alludes to this stigma in his article “How Classics Create an Aliterate Society”: “It bothers me a great deal when high school English teachers or university professors condemn young adult books because they believe they are shallow and poorly written” (37). On many occasions, books that might engage young readers

and promote reading amongst them are discouraged as illegitimate reading choices. As Gallo asserts, classical literature is too often viewed as the only acceptable reading choice for young people, while reading that is more on the interest level of adolescents and young adults is often not promoted or encouraged (37). Allen and Ingulsrud explain that oftentimes adults and teenagers esteem an assortment of reading genres differently, and this is usually due more to the generational gaps than to the actual content of the reading (Allen and Ingulsrud 677). Regardless, the assessment of the genres directly influence the value they are ascribed. Consequently, if older generations fail to see the value in genres like young adult fiction, they may disapprove of these reading choices and discount them as illegitimate.

Allen and Ingulsrud maintain that genres like manga should be ascribed some worth in assessments on reading. Since manga encourages reading as well as provides an aesthetically pleasing experience for students, they conclude that manga should not be banned as it is: “We found that many manga readers can be considered engaged readers—they are highly motivated and have developed a range of strategies to help them understand” (Allen and Ingulsrud 680). Although manga may be reduced to an over-simplistic type of leisure reading, students may still reap many of the same benefits associated with reading more complex genres such as classical literature. For example, students engaged in manga might still find themselves having to think critically about the storyline in order for it to make sense. They might be called upon to gather contextual clues in order to come upon a valid interpretation. Donald R. Gallo argues that instructors can still derive the same literacy-related benefits such as analyzing plots through texts that are more relatable and enjoyable to read for students, texts like manga (36).

A few studies suggest that college students may not be as seriously aliterate as some reports suggest. One study conducted by the American Institutes for Research (AIR), which used the same assessment as that used in the NAAL, demonstrates that college students' literacy is superior to that of the average American adult: "Across colleges and universities, the average literacy of male and female college students was higher than the average literacy of men and women in the nation" (Baer, Cook, and Baldi 5). While the report does not provide a statistic for the amount of college students who do or do not read regularly, the reported overall literacy of most college students appears above the basic level, which indicates that aliteracy is not as prevalent or at least not as severely debilitating at the post-secondary level. Combined with the results of Salter and Brook's study, the AIR's study reveals that aliteracy may not be as much of an epidemic as is assumed. However, as Salter and Brook caution, the very definition of aliteracy and literacy play a large role in assessing how much of the student population can be considered aliterate. If approved literacy is reserved for classical print literature, then the number of students who actively practice literacy may be small indeed. If literacy is opened up to include types of non-traditional texts like Japanese manga or electronic texts, a larger population of college students would be understood to regularly practice literary acts.

Consequences of Aliteracy for College Students

Based on the benefits associated with reading in general combined with the expectations for reading amongst college students, we can surmise that aliteracy threatens the goals of higher

education.. Research supports the idea that reading plays an integral role in the lives of college students as the goal of the university is to prepare students to succeed in their future careers and contribute to the society of which they are a part. Instructors expect that students will read what is required for their courses in order to complement the curriculum and expose students to important texts. Moreover, instructors expect a higher level of literacy than that consistent with functional literacy, a literacy that naturally invokes a deeper level of critical thinking. The act of reading and analyzing relevant course texts will ideally instill a valuable practice that will continue to benefit students beyond their college years.

The expectations for reading amongst university students exceed the limits of functional literacy. It appears that instructors, at least those interviewed by Wambach, subscribe to the belief that students would be unable to pass their classes without completing the required reading with a high level of complex thinking. Likewise, students come into the university with their own expectations for reading. The trouble arises when studies reveal that students are not meeting the expectations the university has for their reading. In some cases, students are reading material that is not attributed the same value as other texts; in other cases, students are not reading at all. Deekle fears that this will result in unprepared future professionals who are unable to meet the continually changing standards of their careers. Salter and Brook, however, caution that before the reading crisis can be fully assessed, all concerned must first agree on what is considered approved reading and what constitutes literacy because, as Robert L. Hillerich concludes, “lack of an agreed-upon definition [of literacy] makes available literacy data imprecise at best” (Hillerich 51). Only after coming to a commonplace on the definition of literacy can the implications of aliteracy studies truly be understood. In the following chapter I

will discuss select emerging literacies that may in fact be replacing the traditional conception of literacy in order to flesh out whether the amount of students who can be constituted “aliterate” is actually as problematic as initially assumed.

CHAPTER FIVE: NEW LITERACIES

In this chapter I will argue for a revised conception of literacy that takes into account the emergence of valid new literacies. This expanded definition of literacy will undoubtedly influence aliteracy studies and how the results of such studies are read. That is, aliteracy studies based on a traditional definition of literacy that discounts new literacies, acknowledging only print (i.e., paper-based) texts, will render different results than studies that take into account new literacies in which students might engage. A traditional-based study might be more apt to report that many students are no longer reading, which in turn may result in alarm that students, like the rest of the population who are aliterate, will be ill-equipped to function at their highest potential. This alarm would consequently result in programs dedicated to increasing the amount of traditional reading that students do. An aliteracy study based on an expanded definition of literacy, on the other hand, one that takes into account engagement with new literacies, might reflect that while students no longer read as much print text as desired, they still engage in a number of new literacies. Furthermore, a revised conception of literacy might acknowledge the legitimacy of new literacies, recognizing that these new literacies may offer many of the same benefits as traditional literacy. From this view, aliteracy, as in the neglect of reading print text, would not cause as much concern as students would still be practicing the type of critical thinking and gathering of pertinent information that is expected of them in college through engagement with new literacies.

In what follows I will first look at a few of these new literacies that students frequently encounter. Research will reveal not only the relevance of these new literacies to the modern university, but how these literacies compare to traditional literacy. It will become apparent that

these new literacies can offer many of the same benefits to students as does reading traditional print text. I will then look at the relationship between traditional and new literacies where I will discuss how they are different and how they are similar. Specifically, research will show how literacies affect the way individuals communicate and how information is interpreted. Perhaps most importantly, the research will show how younger generations relate to new literacies, leading into a discussion of pedagogy related to literacy. Naturally, resistance to these new literacies will emerge, but it will become apparent that these new literacies play a considerable role in literacy studies, whether they are recognized or not.

What Is A New Literacy?

In their text “Toward a Theory of New Literacies Emerging from the Internet and Other Information and Communication Technologies,” Leu et al. explain that while new literacies are undoubtedly emerging at a rapid pace, it is still difficult to provide an exact definition of what new literacies are. It is clear that new literacies would imply a deviation from traditional models of literacy; however, one would find it a complicated task to attempt to define what a new literacy would look like when oftentimes a new literacy is unfathomable before it emerges (Leu et al.). What much of the scholarship regarding new literacies does seem to agree upon, nevertheless, is that many of the newest literacies are emerging from the Internet or information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Leu et al.). In their best attempt to capture the heart of new literacies, specifically new literacies related to the Internet and ICTs, Leu et al. provide the following framework for a conception of new literacies:

The new literacies of the Internet and other ICTs include the skills, strategies, and dispositions necessary to successfully use and adapt to the rapidly changing information and communication technologies and contexts that continuously emerge in our world and influence all areas of our personal and professional lives. These new literacies allow us to use the Internet and other ICTs to identify important questions, locate information, critically evaluate the usefulness of that information, synthesize information to answer those questions, and then communicate the answers to others.

According to Leu et al., new literacies require their own set of skills for critically analyzing the messages communicated through new technologies. And similar to traditional literacy, new literacies function to provide information and communication with others. Where new literacies differ from traditional literacies is that they occur within a new or changing technology, which then influences how analysis and communication take place.

Although an exact definition of new literacies remains elusive, as does an exact definition of literacy in general, new literacies can still be understood by examining ones that have already emerged, or ones that have already been recognized by many as a new literacy. For example, a look at visual literacy, introduced by John Debes in 1969 (Avgerinou and Ericson 280), demonstrates how a different set of analytical skills are required to properly interpret messages sent through new technology. While visual images are nothing new, with the advent of the Internet and television, individuals are exposed to a greater amount of visually-embedded messages than ever before. Corporations make use of complex visuals in the form of television commercials in order to persuade customers to buy certain products. News reporters incorporate video in relaying information to the public. Suzanne Stokes of Troy University argues that it

should not be assumed that individuals are visually literate simply because of the large amount of images that they are exposed to. On the contrary, visual literacy constitutes a new literacy because of its unique use of interpretation and communication with visual images:

The use and interpretation of images is a specific language in the sense that images are used to communicate messages that must be decoded in order to have meaning (Branton, 1999; Emery & Flood, 1998). If visual literacy is regarded as a language, then there is a need to know how to communicate using this language, which includes being alert to visual messages and critically reading or viewing images as the language of the messages. (Stokes 12)

As with traditional literacy, a person is truly literate visually when they are able to function at a higher level of visual literacy. They are not merely receivers of information through the communication of messages via images any more than a person who knows merely the alphabet is traditionally literate. On the contrary, one becomes literate when they are able to decode messages for meaning, understanding the idea of constructs conveyed within those messages, and encode messages via the same technology. In traditional literacy this takes the form of critical reading and writing. With visual literacy this means decoding visual messages for possible meanings, recognizing the distractions meant to create certain constructs, and creating messages through images.

Like other new literacies, visual literacy incorporates many of the same types of skills as does traditional literacy. New literacies differ, however, in the use of those skills. In many cases it can be said that practicing a new literacy such as visual literacy requires that individuals take traditional literacy skills a step further. They would employ analysis, as they did with traditional

literacy, but they would apply analysis to a newly fashioned message, requiring them to come at the analysis from a different angle. Thus, new literacies allow individuals to practice tasks similar to those practiced when reading a traditional printed textual message, which suggests that new literacies can augment traditional literacy instruction, not only detracting from it as some might fear.

Effects of New Literacies

Leu et al. explain that social forces produce technologies that influence literacy. In this way, new literacies are socially embedded and change as their social context changes. And as new literacies result from changing social forces, they in turn affect their social contexts. Specifically, new literacies have the potential to change the way individuals think and how communication occurs. Leu et al. remind us of the Protestant Reformation and the emergence of resulting new literacies as an example of this cycle. Prior to the Reformation, literacy was promoted amongst the religious leaders so that they could read and enforce dogma. At the same time, literacy was mostly withheld from church members, instilling the power of the priesthood as they were the only ones who could interpret the Scriptures and ensure salvation for all. Martin Luther disrupted the social forces of the time, arguing that all individuals should be responsible for their own salvation, consequently meaning that they should be able to read the Scriptures for themselves. As a result, new technologies emerged that allowed for the distribution of the Scriptures translated in the vernacular along with other religious pamphlets. Consequently, the

everyday individual was empowered to learn to interpret the Scriptures for themselves so that they could work out their own salvation.

As with the Reformation, other circumstances have influenced the emergence of new technologies and consequently new literacies which in turn greatly affect how society thinks and communicates. Ong, explains how the need to record information many years ago led to the technology of writing, which in turn “transformed human consciousness” (*Orality and Literacy* 78). According to Ong, cultures preserved information communally through mnemonic devices prior to the invention of writing. To orally communicate and record information required a certain pattern of thought, which Ong argues was completely transformed once writing was invented. The technology of writing displaced many of the orally based traditions of ancient civilizations. Plato likewise explains the effect writing had on the psyche at its conception when in the *Phaedrus* he faults writing for allowing text to take the place of memorization, in his opinion changing things for the worse.

Interestingly, Ong explains that currently the human conscious and the way in which individuals interact is slowly transforming once more with the advent of a new literacy he calls “secondary orality” (“Orality, Literacy, and Modern Media” 69). Secondary orality, a re-emergence of oral practices in a textual society, has emerged as a result of the current turn towards socially constructed knowledge. Ong explains that contemporary technology that allows for verbal communication in order to communicate and construct knowledge, technology such as the telephone, radio, and the Internet, has paved the way for a second rise in orality. Technologies such as these require different communication skills than did the previous means of communication based on text. Individuals may be required to acquire tools for analyzing

messages heard aurally. Furthermore, with the trend in society toward orally-based communication, individuals may choose to communicate using more oral means than they had previously. This is not to say that individuals no longer use text to relay messages, but that with new literacies such as secondary orality, individuals might use a hybrid of means to communicate a message. Returning to visual literacy for example, individuals may watch an online news broadcast that requires them to interpret both the images they are confronted with as well as the verbal message heard. The strategies they use to decipher what is being communicated visually and verbally may be more complex, or at least different from the strategies used when newspapers offered the only “official” source of information.

N. Katherine Hayles, author of “Hyper and Deep Attention: The Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” likewise describes a current shift in thinking patterns associated with new literacies. According to Hayles, the cognitive style of recent generations was comprised of deep attention, or the ability to stay focused on one thing for a long time while ignoring distractions (187). The cognitive style of the current generation, on the contrary, is comprised of hyper attention, which is characterized by “switching focus rapidly among different tasks, preferring multiple information streams, seeking a high level of stimulation, and having a low tolerance for boredom” (Hayles 187). Hayles attributes this shift in cognitive styles to media in particular, stating that media causes young people to seek stimulation (191). So when students are reading or doing homework, they are often switching between tasks to maintain high levels of stimulation. Perhaps most importantly, Hayles suggests that one of the benefits of hyper attention may be that “hyper attention is more adaptive than deep attention for many situations in contemporary developed societies” (194). While Hayles specifically points out that one cognitive

mode is not better than the other (194), hyper attention is a product of the current environment, and so modern students, products of their environments, are naturally fit to adapt to the changing needs in society and in their literacy. Hayles gives the example of an air traffic controller who needs to be able to switch back and forth between multiple screens and tasks while keeping track of each simultaneously (194). Hyper attention, and even a hyper new type of literacy, facilitates the ability of the air traffic controller to do so.

Because new literacies are so relevant, they greatly impact university students. New literacies not only influence the way students communicate with each other and with their instructors, they also affect where and how students receive their information and how they process that information. In fact, Sarah Lyall, former reporter for the *New York Times* who specifically covered the book industry, finds from her research that students today are more prone to turn to electronic options for getting information rather than reading books (20). In her article “Are These Books, or What? CD-ROM and the Literary Industry,” Lyall explains that many times students opt for electronically-based means for communication and information because that is what they are familiar with (20). Unlike older generations who relied more on traditional literacy for their information and communication, younger generations’ exposure to traditional literacy does not inhibit their acceptance of or their ability to navigate new literacies.

Moreover, as new literacies are recognized for their abilities to facilitate learning and communication, they are incorporated more into pedagogy, again affecting students. Leu et al. argue that “new literacies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, impact literacy instruction in the classroom.” According to Leu et al., incorporating new literacies into pedagogy is important as it is the responsibility of educators to prepare students for the literacies they will encounter

outside of the classroom: “In an information age, we believe it becomes essential to prepare students for these new literacies because they are central to the use of information and the acquisition of knowledge” (n.p.). Traditional literacy was stressed in American education so that citizens would be able to participate in an increasing textual society. Likewise, students should not only be exposed to new literacies in the classroom, but they should be further instructed in how to properly analyze the messages they receive via these new literacies as they are taught to do with traditional literacy so that they will be able to intelligently engage with these new literacies outside of the classroom. Regardless of the value of educating students in new literacies, as with change in general, many people are hesitant to embrace new literacies.

Expanding the Definition of Literacy to Include New Literacies

Emerging literacies seem to almost always be met with initial resistance, especially amongst educators. For example, Burmark states that some educators might resist visual literacy instruction in the classroom because it would occupy too much valuable class time in viewing visual media. Avgerinou and Ericson argue that educators are much too resistant to visual literacy instruction because they either refuse to acknowledge the preference of visual images over text for information at least amongst the current generation or because they believe students are acquiring skills for decoding on their own (288). However, after further exploration one can see that there is value to integrating visual literacy in the classroom. Ong explains that there is even resistance to secondary orality as people often view illiterate cultures as less intelligent

cultures. They may see a turn toward oral dissemination of information as a digression to illiteracy and therefore ignorance. However, despite initial misgivings about popular moves in communication, educators cannot ignore that individuals will still view visual images and receive much of their information through auditory means. Emerging literacies do not discount traditional literacy, but at the same time it would be negligent to ignore the value of teaching students to be visually and technologically literate at the expense of only stressing traditional literacy.

It is the affect that new literacies have on students and individuals in general as well as their influence on traditional literacy practices that often invokes resistance to them. And it is this resistance to new literacies that is most relevant in this study of aliteracy amongst college students. Scholars, educators, bureaucrats—they often resist new literacies initially because of an innate fear that the technology driving those new literacies might inhibit an individual's literacy (Allen and Inglusrud; Corder; Deekle; Maeroff; Pascarella and Terenzini United States). Many discount new literacies as illegitimate, instead clinging to a stagnant, unyielding view of literacy as restricted to print. Furthermore, they mistakenly cling to the idea that print literacy in and of itself can fully equip students for the literacies they will encounter outside of the classroom. Consequently, any activity taking away from the reading of print text should rightfully cause concern, especially if they see those activities as lacking any value. A defiantly traditional view of literacy would undoubtedly render contemporary university students aliterate as related studies would only reveal the declining amount of hours students devote to reading approved literature, despite their participation in emerging literacies related to new media. Instead of capitalizing on new literacies that may prove to be more relevant and useful for students in

today's society, traditionalists may only acknowledge information associated with print text.

Douglas Kellner, chair of Philosophy of Education at the University of California, Los Angeles, calls this the "traditionalist protectionist approach":

A traditionalist 'protectionist' approach would attempt to 'inoculate' young people against the effects of media addiction and manipulation by cultivating a taste for book literacy, high culture and values of truth, beauty, and justice, and by denigrating all forms of media and computer culture.

While educators should as Kellner states "foster a variety of literacies to empower students and make education relevant to the demands of the present and future," many resist or at the least do not want to put the effort into rethinking their approach to education, literacy in particular. If a number of educators fall under the category of traditionalist protectionist who resist the influence of media and technology, viewing it as a type of evil, it is no wonder that these educators would be greatly distressed by the dwindling number of students who report reading print.

Despite the resistance to new literacies, research shows that new literacies continually emerge in our society. Leu et al. explain that there are three main social forces that are changing literacy as we know it:

Global economic competition within economies based increasingly on the effective use of information and communication, the rapid emergence of the Internet as a powerful new technology for information and communication, [and] public policy initiatives by governments around the world to ensure higher levels of literacy achievement including the use of the Internet and other ICTs.

And as Leu et al. continually point out, these forces will result in new technologies that will then generate new literacies in order to navigate those new technologies. Consequently, it is imperative that educators and the public in general expand their notion of literacy to include these new literacies. An expanded conception of literacy, one which makes room for the new literacies that students will encounter regardless of educators' view of literacy, is necessary if students and citizens are to be adequately equipped to participate in a society that continually produces new literacies. As Leu et al. argue, students must be taught how to analyze and produce messages embedded in new literacies if they are to function at their highest potential. This will again require an expanded definition of literacy that recognizes the legitimacy of new literacies and the value that they have to offer students. Moreover, I will argue in the next chapter that only an expanded definition of literacy can truly measure the literacy levels and practices of university students.

CHAPTER SIX: ALITERACY OR NEW LITERACIES AMONGST COLLEGE STUDENTS?

The benefits of being a literate person are undeniable. Research supports the argument that literacy improves one's cognitive abilities as well as enables individuals to participate in a progressively literate society. However, as I have demonstrated, the exact definition of what constitutes literacy is disputable. What are the specific elements of literacy that improve and enable individuals since the exact definition of literacy is difficult to pin down? For the purpose of this discussion I have looked at literacy in both its traditional nature as the ability to read and write printed text as well as in its emergent nature. It would seem that while traditional literacy is still vital for a person to operate at their highest potential in the twenty-first century, new literacies are also important for individuals to acquire if they are to fully participate in society. Furthermore, society appears to be moving away from its complete reliance on print text to convey information and build relationships, instead favoring oral and visual means made possible and assessable by advances in technology. Because of this move, it may be that instructing students in new literacies in addition to traditional literacy may be important more now than ever. It may be true that current college students are failing to read print text as much as professors and even the general population may deem desirable, but because of the eminence of new literacies this aliteracy crisis may not be as cataclysmically dire as Mikulecky might theorize. It may be that attaining only functional literacy may in fact not be as limiting as Krashen argues if it is adequately augmented with instruction in new literacies and activities that may actually engage students more.

Importance of Traditional Literacy for the Modern Student

In her book *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt describes a limited view of literacy as “the technical matters of decoding or encoding of written language, a literacy lodged merely in discrete linguistic and scribal skills such as sounding out, spelling, or semantic fluency” (3). While Brandt argues against this narrow view of literacy because of its individualistic nature in favor of a more contextual view of literacy, it is her description here of literacy in its traditional sense that is important for this discussion. In the first pages of her text Brandt refers to traditional literacy as a “staple of life—on the order of indoor lights or clothing” (1), and it is inarguable that in a society as literacy-dependent as ours, literacy is integral for individuals to function: “No government report or labor forecast or educational mission statement these days goes without mentioning that postindustrial conditions now require all Americans to attain higher levels of skill, especially in reading and writing” (Brandt 5). In a society where literacy is expected of individuals, it is vital that each individual acquire literacy, both for the individual personally and for society as a whole, even if it is only the type of functional literacy that is so distasteful to some when it is all that is attained.

An important point that many theorists and scholars make is that literacy is not stagnant. That is to say, the standards that constitute literacy proficiency are continually set higher in industrialized societies, mirroring the advancements in society. Mikulecky remarks that although the reading and writing abilities of the population have improved, “the demands for sophisticated literacy in our society have been increasing more rapidly than these improvements” (“Alitearcy” 2). Brandt’s text traces some of the past changes in literacy standards for specific Americans born between 1895 and 1985. For the individuals she describes, literacy was not nearly as crucial

towards the beginning of their lifetimes as it was towards the end of their lifetimes. Many of the individuals report eventually realizing the need to be more literate in order to continue to function. For example, Brandt describes the account of a union worker whose story took place shortly after World War II. Although this union worker, Dwayne Lowery, had acquired some rudimentary literacy skills at a young age, he never reported to enjoy reading, particularly newspapers. In turn, he graduated at the bottom of his high school class. When in his career he wanted to become more active in a public employees union, he realized his need for further education. In an intensive training session, he was forced to advance his literacy skills: “They pumped a lot of stuff at us to read... We did a lot of work on organizing, you know, learning how to negotiate contracts, contractual language, how to write it” (Brandt 53). Soon after, he became a field staff representative for the union, where he combined the specified literacy skills he had acquired at the training session with his ability to negotiate. While at first his talent for negotiating made up for his lack of more advanced literacy skills, Lowery notes that over time more and more of his responsibilities became entrenched in writing (Brandt 54). Eventually, Lowery was replaced by a college graduate whose education had better prepared him to do Lowery’s job, specifically relating to the literacy-based tasks. With this narrative, Brandt points out that during Lowery’s career one can see the rising literacy standards, resulting in “the worth of existing literate skills [becoming] degraded” (55). While Lowery’s primitive literacy skills made him a satisfactory candidate for the job with a little advanced training, eventually his inability to keep up with the quickly rising literacy standards rendered him incapable of satisfying the changing job requirements. If one is unable to keep up with these rising standards, one soon falls behind those who are able to.

One of the reasons that Stephen Krashen argues for frequent voluntary reading (FVR) is that the standards for literacy continually rise, as Brandt's narratives demonstrate. In his text *The Power of Reading*, Krashen relies on recent studies combined with his extensive experiences in education to argue that FVR enables individuals to meet the rising literacy standards because of the many benefits offered by reading regularly. For example, Krashen describes a study of reform school boys ages 12-17 who read regularly and voluntarily. These boys demonstrate superior comprehension skills, writing fluency and complexity, and positive self-esteem when compared to non-readers (4). And because literacy is reciprocal, as Cunningham and Stanovich argue ("Early Reading Acquisition" 934), FVR enables individuals to continue to improve these skills. As I discussed in Chapter Two, Cunningham and Stanovich specifically looked at the Matthew Effect in literacy practices. They have determined that the more texts one is exposed to, the more cognitive skills in comprehension and decoding one acquires ("What Reading Does" 137). Therefore, the more one reads, the better the individual writes since many writing skills come from reading and since vocabulary is built upon experience with new words, many times through reading vocabulary in its appropriate context (Cunningham and Stanovich; Jenkins, Stein, and Wysocki; Krashen; Stanovich; Stanovich, West and Harrison). Because FVR is so beneficial, at numerous points Krashen condemns those who would be complacent with functional or basic literacy throughout his text. It is those who are satisfied with getting by who often do not read for pleasure, robbing themselves of what they could gain from FVR. And as scholars have reiterated again and again, when one does not sharpen their literacy skills through practice, their skills tend to stagnate, making it difficult for them to keep up in a progressively literacy-dependent society (Mikulecky "Aliteracy" 6). In the end, Krashen determines, "Without

it [FVR], I suspect that children simply do not have a chance [at the highest levels of literacy]” (84).

So what are the implications thus far for college students? First, students need to acquire basic literacy skills at the least, as many have long since realized. Although those individuals who disdain reading may never engage in it voluntarily or often, they need to be able to perform basic literacy tasks so that they can function. This is a given. Additionally, students must acknowledge the importance of literacy, even if they do not enjoy it. As Beers found, some aliterates dislike reading, but as I discussed in Chapter Four concerning the expectations instructors have for literacy skills, students must demonstrate a certain level of literacy skills in order to pass their courses. As Wambach found, many professors claim that some material that must be learned in order to pass the course is covered only in the required reading for their course. Thus, even if students do not engage in reading often, they should realize that literacy-related tasks will always be a part of their educational experiences as well as their lives in general.

More importantly, it may be concluded that students would only benefit from reading frequently and voluntarily because of rising literacy standards as reading enables students to meet them by enabling a practice integral to lifelong learning. Since one of the main goals of education is to prepare students to succeed in their careers and to contribute to society, it is important to equip them with the proper skills to do so, one of which is literacy. Although research shows that it is oftentimes difficult to completely remold reading attitudes after a certain point, students would only benefit from encouragement to read frequently and voluntarily (Applegate and Applegate). In a review of theory related to attitudes toward reading, Verhoeven

and Snow report that research overwhelmingly demonstrates that even positive attitudes toward reading tend to decline over time: “Attitude theory predicts that as children mature and as more and more leisure options compete with reading, positive attitudes toward reading will on average worsen” (Verhoeven and Snow 132). This presents a problem in a society whose functions depend on the literacy of its citizens. That is, studies show that a considerable number of college students do not enjoy reading and even those who do will most likely lose some interest in it, leading aliteracy numbers to increase. Consequently, a number of scholars argue that encouragement is vital in promoting literacy. It is widely accepted that younger students’ perception of reading can be positively molded if they are encouraged in their reading at a young age. It may be more difficult to re-mold these perceptions of reading at an older age; however, a number of scholars argue that even aliterate college students might be more prone to develop a better reading habit if more reading was incorporated into their college courses (Applegate and Applegate; Frager; Tanner). If students were required to read relevant materials as they received training for their professions, they might be apt to see how reading can enhance their careers, ideally encouraging them to continue to read beyond their college years (Frager 19).

In this regard, we can see that Mikulecky’s concerns for the literary habits of students should be a concern for educators. The demands for literacy are indeed becoming more sophisticated and required for more and more jobs, requiring individuals to at least be able to “read for the job” (“Aliteracy” 4). However, we must address Mikulecky’s argument that the biggest danger of aliteracy is that it ensures only a functional basic literacy that will result in less-equipped citizens. Mikulecky argues that a focus on ensuring functional literacy for students is what renders them aliterate as students are not encouraged to enjoy higher levels of literate

activities. Because of this, Mikulecky postulates that aliterate students may be handicapped when they attempt to engage society because their attained literacy skills at graduation will eventually become substandard and because they will be unable to retrain properly, which he anticipates would require advanced literacy skills (“Aliteracy” 11). It is important to realize, though, that Mikulecky’s argument was initially made in 1978—an age when literacy had a different value than it has today. Technology and the media in the 70s did not have as much of a prominent place in every facet of an individual’s life as it does in this present decade. Thus, Mikulecky’s value for traditional literacy differs from the value of traditional literacy today.

While it is undeniable that reading print has certain benefits for individuals even today, there are also supplemental ways to gain and make knowledge that are not restricted to print, and not all of these mediums existed in the 1970s. Furthermore, not all of the reading an individual does takes place on a printed page in the current decade as it often did in the 1970s. For example, reading a newspaper to be knowledgeable of current events has been in many ways replaced by news and radio broadcasts, online news sources, and even mobile applications. Students in the 70s may have been forced to pick up a printed text in order to read a book for class. With technology today, students may still become familiar with the text by listening to it being read on an MP3 while they engage in some other activity. So while Mikulecky’s argument that aliteracy should concern educators is valid, the consequences for aliterate individuals may not be as dire for a college student in 2011 as it was for a college student in 1978. Mikulecky did not envision the place that emerging literacies would have in society and even education today: “Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman may anticipate a brave new world of mass media learning, but the economics of education is highly likely to dictate that such retraining instead occur through print

media...” (“Aliteracy” 10). As one can see, McLuhan and Postman’s predictions about the infusion of media into our everyday lives have actually influenced the way we learn, conflicting with Mikulecky’s estimate. It would seem that traditional literacy does not have the same value today as it did decades ago as it is in many ways supplemented and even replaced by new literacies.

Importance of Instruction in New Literacies for the Modern Student

It has become obvious that technology and the media have greatly influenced Americans, and more specifically, theorists like McLuhan and Postman reveal how they have influenced the literacy of the modern student. New literacies have taken a central role in the lives of individuals. As Leu et al. explain it this way: “In an information age, we believe it becomes essential to prepare students for these new literacies because they are central to the use of information and the acquisition of knowledge. Traditional definitions of literacy and literacy instruction will be insufficient if we seek to provide students with the futures they deserve” (1571). While it is still imperative that an individual become literate in the traditional sense, it may be possible that they will still be rendered handicap if they are unable to participate in new literacies they encounter daily due to the increasing role that technology and even the media are taking in everyday life. As with traditional literacy, students must be able to navigate the new literacies they continually encounter if they will be able to participate in society at their fullest potential. Furthermore, new literacies continually change with advancements in technology that require new mediums of

communication, much like traditional literacy, again highlighting the importance of preparing students for engagement with these new literacies (Leu et al. 1570).

Many years ago Plato condemned the modern man for his over-reliance on writing, and consequently reading. According to Plato, individuals may appear wise after having read a text, but those individuals may still be somewhat ignorant on the matter (Bizzell and Herzberg 165). The faults Plato finds with writing relate to the individualistic nature of traditional literacy. Traditional literacy, while beneficial because of its ability to distribute information, can be limiting in its potential loss of dialectic exchange, which Plato advocates as a way to truly generate knowledge. As discussed, Ong faults literate cultures for losing some of the communal sense associated with the knowledge-preservation of primarily oral cultures. Since today's society continues to progress towards what Ong calls a "secondary orality" where literacy fuses with orality and other new literacies ("Orality, Literacy, and Modern Media" 69), individuals cannot succeed by being traditionally literate alone. More and more, societies are moving away from individualism and toward a socially embedded way of making and communicating knowledge. Much of how communication occurs and knowledge is made now is accomplished through technology. This movement toward socially-constructed and generated knowledge increases the value of being educated in new literacies. In many cases, knowledge is now made and communicated through mediums that are more reminiscent of the dialectic exchanges of classic times. The best way to gain information is no longer relegated to reading a book or listening to an expert. Now, information can be attained from technologically-enabled mediums where a lively conversation between many individuals ensues simultaneously. While traditional

literacy still occurs during these sessions, individuals are able to clarify their understanding through exchanges with others.

Because new literacies are quickly taking such a central role in the lives of many individuals, college students especially, Mikulecky's fear for aliteracy takes on a different meaning. Mikulecky argued in the 1970s that neglecting to read print text would have detrimental effects on adults as they would be incapable of performing more sophisticated literate tasks. However, since traditional literacy is commonly supplemented with emerging literacies in today's society, neglecting to read print text does not handicap individuals in the same way. New literacies not only enable the latest ways of generating and preserving knowledge, but research shows that today's current student gravitates toward these new literacies (Corder; Maeroff; Thimmesch; United States). As stated in the NEA's *Reading at Risk*, "The decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices" (United States xii). So while research shows that more and more students are neglecting to read, which can limit an individual, students are simultaneously engaging in other literacies which may still provide them with the same or in some cases better advantages as does traditional literacy.

Mikulecky feared that aliteracy would hinder lifelong learning as the aliterate individual would be unable to perform increasingly sophisticated literate activities. Frager echoed a similar fear when he found that many education majors do not read. According to Frager, these teachers would eventually fall behind the cutting edge in education if they did not develop a habit of regularly reading books of the trade. However, Lynda Hawkes' study of aliterate educated professionals demonstrates that they can still stay current and even excel in their careers without

frequently reading trade-related texts. Hawkes states, “Interestingly, many highly educated professionals are able to read but do not use reading as their major source for gathering information or for pleasure” (3). For example, Dr. Deloris, an engineer who participated in Hawkes’ study, explained that when she did read it was only as a last resort, similar to her fellow participants in Hawkes’ study. Instead of reading, Dr. Deloris found alternative ways of gathering information, many of them socially or technologically-based: “She also used other forms of technology to gain personal and professional information, such as the TV, talk radio, Blackberry, cell phone, i-pod, and e-mail. When she was at work and needed to find something out quickly, she called the original inventor, author, or source and asked them the question personally” (85). What can be concluded from this is that while functional literacy is vital, aliteracy does not necessarily hinder individuals from succeeding professionally. It would appear that a number of individuals find alternative methods to continue learning. Hawkes’ participants demonstrate how emerging literacies enable individuals to stay up-to-date without necessarily reading frequently or voluntarily.

Traditional literacy is undoubtedly important as a foundation for success for the modern college student. Every student will be required to complete tasks that require the reading and writing of print text at some point. In this sense, aliteracy can prove problematic for college students whose literacy skills stagnate or deteriorate because of neglect. However, it would appear that aliteracy may not be quite as detrimental for the modern college student as it was for the college student of Mikulecky’s day. Neglecting to read print text regularly or voluntarily does not necessarily inhibit the success of a college student; adversely, it does not necessarily benefit individuals either. For aliterate individuals to succeed, it would appear that they must

augment their poor reading habits with engagement in new literacies. And since these new literacies are becoming so prevalent because of the digital age, engagement and education in new literacies may come to be more beneficial for the modern college student in the long run.

In sum, it is the definition ascribed to literacy in the 21st century that will determine the severity of aliteracy. If literacy is taken to mean what it has stood for traditionally, the ability to read and write print text, than aliteracy amongst college students may not prove as problematic as these students can supplement the communication and gathering of information through other modern reliable means. However, if literacy is considered to mean “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and communicate messages in a variety of forms” as Renee Hobbs defines it in her discussion of literacy in the information age (7), then the number of college students who would be considered aliterate would drop considerably. As Salter and Brook argue in chapter three, many of the studies on literacy rates are based on a traditional conception of literacy, oftentimes disregarding reading that does not occur with print text or only considering the voluntary reading of literature. As a result, studies predict that the literacy-related skills of Americans are quickly declining because they are neglecting to read (Salter and Brook 31). Salter and Brook argue, however, that reading in an expanded sense is actually increasing (31); thus, the literacy rates of college students should be considered from a different angle, one that is based on an expanded definition of literacy.

Implications of an Expanded Definition of Literacy on Aliteracy Studies

Peter Roberts, educator at the University of Auckland, New Zealand, says this of the definitions ascribed to “literacy” and their relationships to literacy assessments:

Recognizing the historical fluidity of literacy (and related concepts) at the present moment in world history in the West is useful in assessing competing statements about levels or rates of literacy and illiteracy. Over the past two decades claims have repeatedly been made that 'standards' in reading and writing among school children, university students and other groups have declined. These accusations require stable conceptions of (competence in) reading and writing over time for their credibility. There is mounting evidence to suggest, however, that the 'good' reader (or writer) of yesteryear is vastly different from his or her counterpart in contemporary times. The demands placed upon readers and writers today are certainly not the same as those applied fifty years ago; arguably, more is expected of the 'literate' person in Western societies than ever before (compare, Chall, 1983, p. 7). In fact, as Willinsky (1984, p. 40) observes, the standards commonly set by those invested with the authority of measuring reading and writing achievement tend to restrict our view of what 'literacy' might imply. At any rate, it is not so much a case of falling or rising 'standards' as of changing perceptions and concrete constructs of 'reading', 'writing' and 'literacy'. (Roberts 424)

Roberts aptly captures how complex a task assessing literacy habits is for the contemporary researcher. The final conclusions can vary from assessment to assessment depending on the view of literacy adopted by the researcher. From my research, I conclude that the number of college

students who neglect to read print text, whether required or voluntarily, is in fact increasing, as supported by numerous studies. However, the aliteracy epidemic may be overemphasized because of a narrow view of literacy. I would argue that students' failure to read print text frequently does not necessarily encumber their educational goals. While it is important that students acquire functional literacy at the least, it may not prove completely detrimental that students do not read print text.

Furthermore, if the definition of literacy is expanded to include the reading of previously unapproved texts such as manga, it becomes obvious that the results of literacy studies will change. For example, the NEA's study of the reading rates of Americans was based on the narrow view of literacy as the reading of literature. While the report clarifies that the study only considers literary reading, it still determines that "The trends among younger adults warrant special concern, suggesting that—unless some effective solution is found—literary culture, and literacy in general, will worsen" (United States, *Reading at Risk* 7). However, if the NEA were to broaden their consideration of approved literate activities, including more than the reading of short stories and novels, they might find, like Salter and Brook, that literacy rates are increasing (31). As Salter and Brook note, "Publishers' statistics indicate that people are increasing their purchase of books," suggesting that people may be reading more. These types of statistics, combined with the inclusion of technologically-enabled mediums of reading may result in a different literacy rate. Again, students may be reading traditional literature less, but studies seem to indicate that students are engaging in new literacies and reading unconventional texts more.

Since literacy in itself is changing, which would include an evolution of even new types of literacy, and since students seem to be more inclined to engage in emerging literacies, which

are taking an increasingly prominent place in society as opposed to traditional literacy, more value should be placed on emerging literacies in conjunction with traditional literacy, especially in the classroom. While traditional literacy is inarguably important for undergraduates—it is disconcerting that students would rather not read a book, even when required—it must be realized that new literacies are quickly becoming equally important for students to not only acquire, but to become proficient in. As Leu et al. explain, “New literacies, whether intentionally or unintentionally, impact literacy instruction in classrooms” (1571), making it important for educators to rethink their pedagogy in regards to literacy. While it may distress English instructors especially that their students do not share their passion for traditional literature, they cannot dismiss the importance of instruction in new literacies for students. They cannot make the mistake of placing all their energy into remediating the literary habits of students when their skills in other types of literacy are quickly becoming equally important. So while aliteracy as Mikulecky defined it is disconcerting, it does not have to mean failure for students. Students can be encouraged to read print text, and it can even be required, but they must also be taught how to aptly decode messages that they constantly come in contact with from technologies other than books. In today’s society, students can be highly literate traditionally, yet still be handicapped if they fail to bring those same skills to other types of literacy. And while it might be easy to assume that students will transfer the same types of decoding skills they use when reading in the traditional sense to new types of literacies they encounter, especially because of the benefits associated with traditional literacy, the fact is students still might not do so unless they are taught how and are provided a guided platform where they can practice how to do so.

Finally, recognizing the value of instruction in new literacies in the classroom does not mean that traditional literacy is consequently devalued. As Deekle explains, even in the face of a generation that prefers technologically-enhanced means of entertainment and education, “reading remains a fundamental building block for a liberal education, providing a broad basis for knowledge and understanding” (264). Nor will emerging literacy instruction replace traditional literacy instruction as some might fear. On the contrary, “The turn to electronic technologies (particularly multimedia) as college teaching tools may positively enhance undergraduate learning...” (Deekle 267). Although students will benefit from instruction in new literacies, students must still practice complex literacy skills associated with print text if they are to succeed. It is the complex thinking skills associated with decoding literature that sets the foundation for critical thinking in other areas (Deekle 267). Moreover, new literacies can enhance the reading experience for undergraduates. Reading can become a dynamic activity that would engage students more as they are enabled to expand printed text with associated video, sounds, and pictures available through technology (Deekle 268).

Most importantly, instruction in new literacies might offer a solution to the problem of aliteracy. New literacies not only offer a beneficial supplement to ideas presented in textual form, but they have the potential to actually encourage students to read, or at the least to provide aliterate students with some of the critical thinking skills that will be required of them throughout their lifetimes. As Deekle aptly puts it, “College teaching increasingly uses electronic technology to bridge the growing gap between an aliterate population of undergraduates and an ever-expanding knowledge base” (269).

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