

History of Literacy  
Communications 636

Dr. Marvin  
Spring, 1986

The purpose of this course is to familiarize students with major current work in the history of literacy, primarily in Europe and North America.

Researchers have recently taken a skeptical view of the so-called universal effects hypothesis of literacy, the claim that literacy marks a divide between modern and traditional societies, abstract and concrete thought, primitive and civilized peoples. Attention has shifted to the description, analysis and comparison of literate practices across social groups and historical periods, and the significance of these practices within larger frameworks of social meaning.

If the universal effects hypothesis has been rejected in its older form, the reorganization of scholarly consensus about what literacies are and do implies a new conventional wisdom about literacy, however differently or more loosely drawn. We will examine models, evidence, and findings in a variety of areas, including: (1) how literacy has been redefined, and with what consequences for historical understanding and contemporary investigation (2) relationships between literate and oral modes in different cultures and circumstances, and (3) how competencies and privileges associated with literacies in different cultures have been marked and distributed, and with what effect.

Weekly meetings will consist of analysis and discussion of common readings for which students will take substantial in-class responsibility. Each student will submit a final paper on a topic approved by the instructor. During the course of the semester students may also be asked to write several short critical papers concerning the readings.