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Literate Lives in the Information Age: Narratives of Literacy from the United States.

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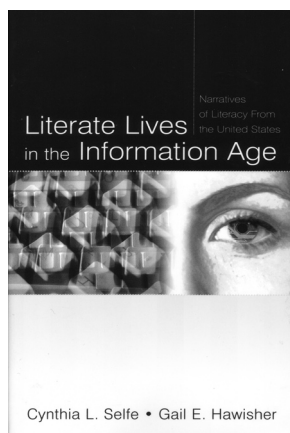
For those interested in the intersections of technologies and literate practices, Cynthia L. Selfe and Gail E. Hawisher's *Literate Lives in the Information Age* provides detailed narratives from twenty individuals regarding the impact of various technologies on the formation of their literacy practices. As computerized technologies continue to influence both our daily and scholarly lives, a more complex understanding of the term "technological literacy" is necessary. Already gaps are emerging in students' digital literacies at home and at school. While many studies have demonstrated that students are increasingly aware of and make use of various technologies for entertainment purposes outside of the classroom, gaps are emerging between students' often skillful digital literacies that emerge from their social activities and the paucity of technological literacies in their academic activities.

As a result, effective instruction at the university level demands that academics address the issue of technological literacy by developing successful methods of encouraging electronic literacy skills in students. The authors speak to this gap in the introduction to their book by calling for improved approaches to teaching technological literacy; they state that "if U.S. students cannot write to the screen—if they cannot design, author, analyze, and interpret material on the Web and in other digital environments—they will have difficulty functioning effectively as literate human beings in a growing number of social spheres" (2). This book serves, then, as an introduction to the historical emergence of technological literacy in the United States in the last few decades. The authors not only trace the development of individuals' technological literacies, but also examine the impact of historical, cultural, economic, political, and ideological factors on the development of these literacies (2-3).

The methodological perspective underlying *Literate Lives in the Information Age* strongly aligns with ethnographic and case-study community literacy research and is in part inspired by an oral-history literacy project undertaken by Deborah Brandt. In brief, the authors' methodology is as follows: They recruited over 350 individuals to participate in interviews about the development of their own technological literacies and complete a technological literacy questionnaire. From these respondents, Selfe and Hawisher selected twenty case-studies that represented a range of backgrounds; the participants varied in age, educational background, ethnic and racial profile, and location. Some of the individuals profiled, for example, are traditionally aged undergraduate students, while others are drawn from the private sector and work as technical communicators, public relations managers, graphic artists, and so on. Many of the participants are employed in higher education as adjunct writing instructors, directors of college learning centers, and university professors. These varied social and cultural backgrounds, then, allow for a particularly interesting selection of technological narratives that offer glimpses into the diversity of technological literacy in the United States today. The engaging case studies introduced in *Literate Lives* proffer a remarkably personal perspective on the subject of electronic literacies. As a result, "the stories of the participants speak to us," note Selfe and Hawisher, "and we hope they will to readers as well" (5).

The authors demonstrate a clear commitment to ethical practices in case-study research, devoting a large portion of the introductory chapter to a discussion of their background and methods in performing their research. As much as possible, the authors have attempted to retain the voice, words, and language of the participants in recounting the studies, keeping intact "their words and their phrasing, their grammatical structures and their distinctive word choices, even the oral markers of their speech" (9). Not only does this commitment to preserving a participant's own voice reflect the desire of the researchers for ethically sound case-study research, it also allows them to retain the age and class markers, geographical idioms, and overall personality evident in each participant's story. By identifying each named participant as a "co-author," Selfe and Hawisher attempt to rectify the usual hierarchical relationship among contributors of qualitative research projects. While not all co-authors seem comfortable with the title, for various reasons—and their objections are addressed in the introduction of the project—the authors clearly address the challenges inherent in co-authorship and as a result highlight the rich complexity of the project as a whole.

Following Brandt's research methods, Selfe and Hawisher divide each of the six case-study chapters by the age of the participants; each cohort is grouped by their year of birth, each chapter loosely arranged by decades. Thus Chapter 1 begins with the stories of three individuals born in the 1970's when the initial impact of personal computers in schools and at home was first felt, while Chapter 2 examines three women born in the 1960's and Chapter 3 focuses on two individuals born in the 1950's. Subsequent chapters break slightly from the chronological sequence to focus on particular groups still

loosely bound by age. Chapter 4 looks at two individuals, both born in the 1960's but into very different local cultures. Chapter 5 traces three generations of black southern women's technological literacies. Chapter 6 focuses on women's experiences growing up in the late 1960's, examining how second-wave feminism and other sweeping societal changes have impacted these participants' digital literacies. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes the study with a look toward the future when the authors query what the term literacy will mean in the following decades, particularly within online environments (183). Each chapter skillfully situates the respondents within not only a significant historical context, but also within their own personal understandings of the various factors that affect people's technological literacies. This focus on the individuals who helped co-author the text with Hawisher and Selfe makes the narratives come alive; it seems almost inevitable that within the pages readers will hear a distant echo of themselves and come to understand even more keenly the intersections of digital literacies and personal context as applied to their own lives.

Ultimately, the authors note that this collection is not meant to—and indeed *cannot*—capture an entirely representative history of technological literacy in the United States during the past several decades (211). Instead, this project should serve as a springboard to encourage individuals interested in the interplay of technologies in community literacy efforts to find out more and perhaps even continue on in the vein of Selfe and Hawisher's project. "Far too many stories […] remain uncollected, unheard, unappreciated," they note, and while these stories again are not meant to represent the collective voice of individuals' experiences with technological literacy, they do offer a richly layered discussion of the complex interplay between personal and social contexts as applied to digital literacy today (212). Thus in the conclusion the authors proffer a set of eight "emerging themes" based on the subtle nuances of the life histories of all 350 participants in the study. These eight themes supply reminders that literacies—technological, digital, electronic, or otherwise—are themselves complicated concepts imbricated within equally complex sociocultural ecologies. As a result, no one course of action can address the complexity of electronic literacy; no one solution will suffice to tackle problems of technological access, the digital divide, and the acquisition of digital literacies. However, this volume provides a number of moments that should encourage us to more carefully consider those small steps we can each take to address the crucial concept of electronic literacies.