

## Folk Literacy and Me

Walter Ong, a professor of English literature, cultural and religious historian, and philosopher questions why,

We have the term 'literature', which essentially means 'writings' (Latin *literatura*, from *littera*, letter of the alphabet), to cover a given body of written materials—English literature, children's literature—but no comparably satisfactory term or concept to refer to a purely oral heritage, such as the traditional oral stories, proverbs, prayers, formulaic expressions (Chadwick 1932–40, *passim*), or other oral productions of, say, the Lakota Sioux in North America or the Mande in West Africa or of the Homeric Greeks. (10)

This concept of oral heritage brings up questions about what exactly literacy means, and what kinds of activities are found under the heading of literacy. Is it only reading and writing, or can other types of knowledge also be considered literate? I found through the process of writing an autoethnography, and a discourse community project, that the relationship between literacy and folk knowledge is complex, and that there is debate among scholars about whether folk knowledge is a form of literacy. I found the best evidence to support the idea that oral folk discourse is a form of literacy was through my own personal experiences. This project seeks to meld the writing from my autoethnography to the work from my discourse community project, into a larger project that posits a theory about the value of folk literacy. This project argues that a folklife education is a valuable type of literate knowledge, and that folk knowledge is worth serious study in order to understand how it can influence the literacy potential in people who experience this different type of education.

I will begin my study of the value of an oral tradition focused education with sections of my revised autoethnography, which discusses my experiences with both traditional public schools, private schools, and even home schooling in several diverse locations. This look at my past allowed me to see the differences and connections between institutionalized education,

and an education that was enhanced with the folk knowledge of a community in Western North Carolina. Then I will focus on a specific discourse community to provide further evidence of literate knowledge, and the transmission through oral culture.

### **Oral Folk Education and Literacy**

In an English class called Introduction to Folklore Studies, I learned about folk groups, which can consist of as few as two people, or an infinite number of members. These groups are made up of any people that come together and share knowledge, but that knowledge is generally passed down through oral tradition, and is not written down. *The Study of American Folklore* says there are six major categories of folk groups, "occupational groups, age groups, family groups, gender-differentiated groups, regional groups, and ethnic or nationality groups" (51). Many of the important literacy artifacts that I remember, deal with things people said to me about literacy and intelligence. The values they expressed to me about literacy were passed down through folk groups in the oral tradition.

In the essay, "Sponsors of Literacy," Deborah Brandt defines "sponsors of literacy" as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy-and gain advantage by it in some way" (WAW, 46). She makes it clear that it is not only institutions like a school, library, or teacher that are responsible for the literacy development of an individual. There are many ways in which a person becomes literate, many different types of literate activities, and many ways in which people express their literacy. The sponsors that were instrumental in shaping my educational experiences are divided into regional and family groups. These sponsors also fall into

institutional or folk categories. My first literacy sponsors were my Mom and Dad - a middle school teacher for 33 years in Canton, Ohio. They taught me to read before I went to kindergarten.. They moved to Canton from their ancestral home in Western North Carolina, in the late 1940's, to raise their children. My dad wanted to get a college education, and knew (through the grapevine) that there were jobs for educated people there. He also wanted to give his kids a good education, which he believed they could not get in 1940's rural, mountainous, North Carolina, with its agriculture based economy. A shift occurred in my education, and the way I perceived myself as a student, when I moved to North Carolina when I was six. About two thirds of the way through my first grade year, my grandmother had a stroke, and my family moved to there to be near her.

## Rural Roots



*Winter View of Hayesville, NC. Image [hayesville.org](http://hayesville.org)*

I attended school in the mountains of Western North Carolina. When I went to my new school, I was initially called out for being "a smarty pants," and "talkin' funny" by my classmates (I did have a northern, or "Yankee" accent after all). I thought my classmates talked funny too.

Now I have a pronounced southern accent, after living thirty years in the South. I was also called "teacher's pet" because I would willingly volunteer if I knew the answer to the question. It seemed that here the educational focus was different. There was less focus on cultivating intelligence, and more focus on cultivating good citizens, athletes, and just doing what was required to get by. This wasn't a bad thing, and I did really enjoy school in Hayesville. I just didn't know what I was missing until we moved to Florida a few years later. I could already read before I began school, and many of my new classmates in NC were just learning to read in the first grade. This is when I realized that I had somehow received access to literacy sponsors and skills that many of my new classmates did not. I did not think the other kids were less smart than me, just that I learned something before they did. I had to hold back sometimes and wait while the others learned things I already knew. I did this so I would fit in with them, and so I wouldn't seem like a "bookworm" with my thirst for knowledge, science, and books.

I also want to show that there was a focus on varied kinds of literacy and knowledge in different locations. In general, I felt that acknowledging skill in standard literacy skills, like reading and writing, among my peers in Ohio was more acceptable than it was in NC. I connected with Sherman Alexie's essay where he discusses the different types of literacy (mostly oral) that the Native American children display in their lives outside school, but which don't transfer into traditional reading and writing skills inside school. He writes, "They struggled with basic reading in school but could remember how to sing a few dozen powwow songs. They were monosyllabic in front of their non-Indian teachers but could tell complicated stories and jokes at the dinner table" (WAW, 130). I think that the skills that those children mastered are a

type of literacy, just not ones we traditionally think about as literacy because they don't require reading or writing anything down.

## **Mountains and Folk Literacy**

Western North Carolina has many sponsors of literacy who are treasures abounding with traditional folk knowledge, especially regarding farming and cultivation of crops. The children that are educated here (thankfully I am one of them) receive access to an entirely different kind of literacy. An unwritten knowledge of how to survive, thrive, and create a life for themselves in a place that is both dangerous and beautiful. I am so grateful to have sponsors in my life that come from both places. Because of my exposure to these vastly different literacy realms, I think I am a more well-rounded and intelligent citizen. I learned how to grow food, and harvest and preserve it. I learned how to use native plants and herbs for medicine. I learned how to catch food and survive in the woods, if I needed to. I learned how to build a fire, cook, build chicken and animal houses, and many more things. Topics might range from simple physics and geometry- like chopping wood or aiming a 22 rifle, to the chemistry of baking the perfect cake from scratch. These things are not taught in school, but they are nonetheless a valuable type of literate knowledge, especially to a person who lives in that region.

In NC, having your nose in a book a lot of the time, as I did, seemed to me to not be a good thing. I think this is related to the very agrarian, rural, mountain community that I lived in. My parent's families have lived there since the 1700's. Professions listed on the US Census since the 1800's for my family are strikingly uniform - Farmer. I too have inherited the farming gene, but was fortunate enough to be born in a time where I could go to high school, go to college, and seek my fortune in the world pretty much however I choose. The generations

before me were required to farm the family land so they would survive. To live they must work the dirt. Even as young children they must work the land, or they will not survive. They simply didn't have time for much else. Maybe traditional forms of literacy are not foremost on your mind when you work the dirt every day.

## **Southward to Cities on the Sea**

Another tremendous shift in my life and education occurred when I was in third grade. We moved to Sarasota Florida, and I was placed in a gifted program.



*Aerial View of Sarasota, Florida. Image wikipedia.org*

I thrived there academically. I felt like I was in an environment where traditional literacy and intelligence skills were valued. Of course, the downside for me was that I was missing out on those valuable experiences from North Carolina, that I valued nearly as highly as my academic experiences. And, I would return there in just a few more years. In the gifted program, I really learned to write both analytically and creatively. Hours were devoted each day to writing, reading comprehension exercises, puzzles, creating projects that included research, and the

focus was on instilling practices that would lead to success in a wide range of areas. This is the first time I remember writing anything creatively in school. I had been writing in my journal, and taking a stab at poetry for a few years. This experience of learning to write was a critical step in my future literacy development. I don't remember there being any specialized or accelerated learning programs at my school in NC. Here I felt proud if I knew the answers, and I was engaged with my classmates about learning, books, writing and traditional literacy skills. I never felt that I should hide my intelligence, as I had when I was in NC. After a few years at that school in Sarasota, we moved to Jacksonville, FL where I completed sixth grade.

I was also in the gifted program in the Jacksonville public school system. I was only there for about two years, but I remember it was very similar to Sarasota schools, except that there were more kids per class, and the school was not as new or state of the art as the school in Sarasota. The economy there is focused on manufacturing, military installations, aviation, and is also a major sea port. This created a community where many families lived and worked. Contrasting with Sarasota's predominant population of retirees. Here the variety of people from all kinds of backgrounds was great, and I gained a good education, but also a more complete cultural experience. The school I attended in Jacksonville also focused on establishing writing skills for fourth and fifth grade levels, but not quite as much attention was paid to creativity and development of better reading and writing skills as in Sarasota.

## **Return to Appalachia**

Back to North Carolina for family again, but this time Dad put me in private schools, because he felt the education would be better than public schools there. I was home-schooled through a correspondence VHS class on tape program from Pensacola Christian College,

where I mostly learned on my own. After finishing homework, I went out into the woods or the garden to learn about folk knowledge. I did not yet realize how valuable this knowledge would be to my future.

I have realized through the process of writing this autoethnography that I am so thankful for my unique variety of literary sponsors, and the different types of literacy they exposed me to. My literacy skills are an amalgamation of all those values that are expressed in both institutional and folk culture that I managed to absorb along the way. I am also grateful for this opportunity to dig deeper into what influenced my literacy, in order to try to understand the larger context. I learned more about how I was shaped by my experiences in different geographic regions, and I learned about the tremendous value I place on my folk knowledge education.

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The following section is from my Discourse Community Project where I begin to discuss the value of the folk education that I focus on in the autoethnography project. I show how folk knowledge enhanced my own institutional education in ways that changed my view of what literacy is forever, and how it also influenced my future intellectual development.

## **Preserve**

: to keep in an original state or good condition

: to keep safe from harm or loss

: to prevent from decaying (M.Webster)

Because the goal of preservation is to maintain an original condition or prevent further loss due to decay, writing preserves the thoughts, skills, culture, and knowledge of humans.

This essay will first discuss what is valuable about oral knowledge, then the focus will shift to a look at the characteristics that define a discourse community, and finally I will analyze a particular discourse community, of homegrown food preservers, to see what can be revealed about how knowledge is shared. Knowledge can be lost entirely or transformed over time. The flexibility of a mostly verbal and practical use transmission of knowledge has advantages that allow for modifications of technique. When a particular discourse community tends to share their valuable knowledge via word of mouth, instead of more technical means like writing, the community is still able to preserve their knowledge in an original or good state. These thoughts can first lead to a question to be considered before the discussion of the discourse community I will analyze can begin: Does knowledge need to be written down in order to be preserved, or even valuable?

Walter Ong discusses the view of scholars on the value of oral art forms:

scholars often went on to assume, often without reflection, that oral verbalization was essentially the same as the written verbalization they normally dealt with, and that oral art forms were to all intents and purposes simply texts, except for the fact that they were not written down. The impression grew that, apart from the oration (governed by written rhetorical rules), oral art forms were essentially unskillful and not worth serious study. (Orality and Literacy 10)

Ong's statement on the often held viewpoint of scholars that, "oral art forms were essentially unskillful and not worth serious study," reveals a lot because he says the scholars held this viewpoint, "often without reflection." I agree that the scholars may be mistaken about oral art forms not being worth studying. I will attempt to conduct a serious study of how a discourse

community composed of members who participate in the oral art form of homegrown food preservation otherwise known as "canning," are learning and teaching (through mostly verbal means) a valuable form of practical literacy. I will consider how the practice of homegrown food preservation is an "oral production" as Walter Ong discusses, as well as what he calls an "oral art form." Preserving food is an incredibly utilitarian art form that is also beautiful, complex, and delicious. The discourse community in SouthWestern North Carolina I will consider, is made up of small farmers who grow and preserve their harvests. This "canning" community has a many generations old oral tradition.

In his essay, "The Concept of Discourse Community," John Swales lists six characteristics of a discourse community. **The first** is a "broadly agreed set of common goals" (220). The goals for this discourse community involve growing edibles and preserving the food for future use. **The second and third criteria** for analysis provided by Swales are: means of intercommunication among members, and use of participation to provide information or feedback within the community (221). Group community and extended family gatherings for the purpose of processing large crop harvests aka "Corn Shuckings" or "Hog Killings" are a primary way for members of this community to trade information and to ask questions of each other. I remember being at many corn shuckings, sitting around in a circle of about 20-30 people while everyone talked. They mostly talked about the corn harvest and how the drought caused the ears to be smaller, or that too much rain had caused the ears of corn to be extra wormy this year. I learned so much at these kinds of gatherings. Not only about how to harvest and prepare the crops, but about how to grow them. Hanging out in the garden (or anywhere really) chatting with family, the telephone, and produce stands where the grower is also the proprietor of the stand are also great resources for gaining knowledge.

**A fourth aspect** Swales outlines in his essay as being a requirement for a discourse community is that it utilizes one or more genres to communicate its aims (221). An unusual aspect of this discourse community is the surprising lack of written texts. The vast amount of skills, knowledge, and information that are used in the execution of a productive garden, and in the process of canning even a single jar of homemade anything, is astounding. So how has this knowledge been "preserved?" The knowledge of this particular discourse community is acquired and assimilated to memory predominantly through verbalized teaching and practical application.

Swales gives **a fifth condition** to be met for a discourse community, which is the use of a specific lexis, that is well known to the members of the discourse community, but maybe not the outside world. This area is very rich for mining in this discourse community. Terms like "poke salad" may not be familiar to those outside the community. Poke is a plant that grows wild in the mountains. It's greens can be cooked and eaten if times are lean, but are not as tasty as say garden greens like mustard or collards. The bright red berries of the poke plant are however highly toxic and should never be eaten. The "salad" refers to the cooked mix of poke greens, scrambled eggs, and onions.

The final requirement for Swales discourse community is that it have "members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discorsal expertise" (222). A large percentage of people in this community participate in the discourse concerning growing and preserving food. My father Kenneth in particular, (now that Mom has passed away) is an expert master class in this discourse community. He belongs to the Depression era generation of members who are the top of the knowledge chain, but it extends to my own generation, and further. My father's great grandsons are also very skilled in growing and preserving, because they learned from the best.

Members of this community are often stereotyped in regard to their literacy skills. Mountain folk are often stereotyped as uneducated, barefoot, backwoods, illiterate, and maybe even stupid by some. The majority of people I know are very well spoken, intelligent, and even exemplary in their knowledge and skills. There is a lot of measurement math involved in canning, as well as a huge amount of knowledge about the production and preservation process of the food. Since I believe that this community participates in a form of literacy, I include this quote from UNESCO about the definition of literacy, "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their wider community or society." (13)

I argue that the canning discourse community I have considered does all those things to the utmost except, "using printed and written materials." Does this mean that this is not a literate community? I don't think so. I think this community is just as literate as one in which written texts are the primary means of communication. There may even be advantages to this type of knowledge dissemination. My family also collected food to eat and preserve from the wild. We collected muscadine grapes to be made into jelly, and ramps (a pungent type of wild onion) for Dad to mix with his scrambled eggs. He would eat this ramp eggs on the front porch thanks to Mom's urging. She couldn't stand the smell of ramps. We collected the coveted and highly valuable and prized ancient ginseng from the mountain sides on the edge of the Nantahala National forest, on family land. We laid down tarps and collected black walnuts that were difficult to extract the meat from the nuts, but were so worth it. We used the nuts for many things, but my favorite was a black walnut cake Mom made that I don't have the recipe for,

because one never existed. Only in Mom's head. She just knew. This just knowing how to make something as complex as a homemade from scratch cake, with harvested from the mountains black walnuts, is special literate knowledge. I want to preserve that knowledge like Mom always preserved the wild blackberries we picked after jumping from the car with our buckets to gather them on the roadside. That road that winds its way up Old Highway 64 towards Winding Stair Gap in the Nantahala National Forest is located in one of the most ancient and mysterious mountain ranges on the planet.

Much of the knowledge and skill that allows the harvest to be preserved from decay by canning, storage, and freezing practices has been passed down through the generations using the art and literate practice of canning. New practices have of course been created along the way, and modifications to technique evolve as technologies change and make the work of preservation easier. A question to consider in a future project might be, because the oral knowledge is "preserved" differently does it somehow become more flexible than that of written knowledge? This folk knowledge about how to grow, preserve, and enjoy great healthy food is important. The knowledge has been mostly passed down through families and neighbors by word of mouth, but there are some few texts the people create that facilitate the dissemination of literacy skills and knowledge to the next generation of farmers, canners, and hungry folk. My conclusion about this hybrid project is that I learned the value of my literate folk knowledge, and that through my understanding of that value, I can see how both institutional and folk educations allowed me to become a more literate person. Thanks to my many literacy sponsors, varied experiences, and especially my exposure to folk knowledge as a form of literacy, I feel I am a more well-rounded thinker, student, reader, and writer.

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