

Literacy as a Key to Successful Aging

by Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk

In her influential research on literacy, Deborah Brandt has emphasized the ways in which literate practices became commodified in twentieth-century America as a way of enhancing production in a capitalistic economy. Yet she also points out, in the introduction to *Literacy in American Lives* (2001), that “What people are able to do with their writing or reading in any time and place—as well as what others do to them with their writing and reading—contribute to their sense of identity, normality, possibility” (11). This presentation is based on a small-scale study of successful aging among the women of Plainfield, a small town in western Massachusetts. Beginning in the summer of 2007, I have been interviewing and studying women in this community who, to me, embody successful aging, four women whom I see as role models because of their continued vitality and engagement with life well into their eighties and nineties.

One theme that has emerged from my analysis is that literate activities—specifically reading and writing—have been important in these women’s lives from childhood on and have been especially significant in the elder years. For these women—and many others—literacy is important not only for the value that these “skills” can earn in the workplace but for the life-enhancing benefits that come to individuals who maintain an active engagement with literacy throughout their lives.

A Few Words about Methodology

In designing and implementing this study I have tried to enact the type of phenomenological human science described by Max van Manen in *Researching Lived Experience*. As he explains it, “From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to *know* the world is profoundly to *be* in the world in a certain way, the act of researching—questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become more fully part of it . . .” (5). Moreover, this

type of research is an act of care and love. As Van Manen puts it, “Then research is a caring act: we want to know that which is most essential to being” (5).

In moving from the global questions of successful aging to the more specific questions related to the value of literacy across the lifespan, I also identify with the feminist rhetorical practices described by Gesa Kirsch and Jacqueline Jones Royster. In fact, I see great similarities between the methods they articulate in their June 2010 *CCC* article and the phenomenology described by van Manen in his 1990 book. Like van Manen, Kirsch and Royster value reflection, intuition, care, and listening:

Regardless of application, the imperative is to develop mechanisms by which listening deeply and respectfully becomes standard practice not only from the perspective of feminist rhetorical scholarship, but from rhetorical studies writ large. As an inquiry strategy, deep listening is geared toward facilitating a quest for a more richly rendered understanding—listening to and learning from the women themselves, going repeatedly, not to our assumptions and expectations, but to the women—to their writing, their work, and their worlds, seeking to ground our inquiries in the evidence of the women’s lives, taking as a given that the women have much to teach us if we develop the patience to pay attention in a more paradigmatic way. (649)

Learning from Little Girls

It might seem surprising that in a study of advanced aging, I decided to start by focusing the first interview on the women’s childhoods. I suspected that it would not be wise to try to understand who these women have become in their later years without first finding out who they had been as little girls. And in fact, I have come to believe that these women possessed certain qualities as young children that help to explain why they have been so successful in staying active and productive and just plain fun to be around in their later years.

In the first interviews, which were focused on childhood, two of the women brought up the fact that, from an early age, they had been fascinated with words. Kay Dilger Metcalfe, who was ninety-four at the time of the interview, explained: “I was terribly interested in words. And even from junior high school I had a little booklet, one

of those black and white books. I would write things that I liked, copy things that I liked there. I've done that ever since then."

Irene Jordan Caplan, age eighty-eight at the time, described how she taught herself to read at the age of three by playing at the Chautauqua desk her mother had ordered for her:

It was the joy of my life when I was a VERY young child. . . . It hung on the wall. You know, maybe about this size [gestures about 3 feet] and had a desk level that you could unfasten, and it would fall down and make a little desk. And it had charts that you could take out, scrolls that you could replace and go through it. . . . Everything was on sort of greenish paper with the little white drawings. It was the most amazing educational toy. [It was based on] Montessori[’s ideas]. And her method of teaching reading was like you’d draw a cat, like the way you do, just a few lines. And you’d have the picture of the cat, and it would say C as in “cat.”] . . . And one night the family was sitting around in front of the fireplace. [There weren’t very many of us at that point because I was three.] And Mother and Daddy said, “What is she saying?” I was sitting on the floor, and there was a piece of newspaper open on the floor, and I was saying, “5 C puh ginge ham.” And they kept saying, “What IS she saying?” And they looked down and saw that it was “5 cents per yard. Gingham.”

Later in this interview, Irene noted the importance of “words” in her life:

I love words. I think words are fascinating. . . . I try to do crossword puzzles and so forth. You know, I love that chapter in the book of John, I think it was: “In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And the word WAS God.” You know, it says He spoke the worlds into being. He said, “Let there be light.” Words have a POWER beyond almost anything that we know of. So I really have always been fascinated with words.

The other two participants, Blanche Svoboda Cizek and Anna Rice Hathaway, didn’t refer directly to their love of words, but both of them clearly have a lifelong involvement with reading and writing and speak with an extensive vocabulary. Literacy activities help to sustain them in the active lives they lead today.

In my reading about successful aging [[click here for an annotated bibliography](#)] one source was especially fascinating in regard to literacy: David Snowdon’s *Aging with Grace: What the Nun Study Teaches Us About Leading Longer, Healthier, and More*

Meaningful Lives. This book reports the often surprising results of the so-called Nun Study, in which 678 Catholic sisters have been studied regularly for insights into successful aging. This study is concerned with learning more about Alzheimer's disease, and all participants in the Nun Study have given permission to have brain autopsies conducted after they die. This has resulted in scientific data that have been reported in numerous articles in prestigious medical journals. In addition to all the medical data, the researchers also gained access to significant verbal data—the “autobiographies” that the young women were required to write before taking their vows. Ninety-three of these autobiographies (the average age of the young authors was twenty-two) were selected for analysis. Dr. Susan Kemper, a psycholinguist experienced in studying the effect of aging on language skills, developed a system to analyze the autobiographies for “idea density” and “grammatical complexity” (Snowdon, 109). Kemper and her team analyzed the autobiographies without knowing the current cognitive condition of the nuns. It turned out that “idea density” in the early writings was a stronger predictor of current positive cognitive status than grammatical complexity, though both showed some relation. Snowdon was surprised by the findings: “Somehow a one-page writing sample could, fifty-eight years after pen was put to paper, strongly predict who would have cognitive problems” (112-13). This conclusion did not seem to be influenced by educational level or occupation.

Although I haven't done a linguistic analysis of my interviews with the four women in my study, I have constantly been impressed by the complexity of their ideas and the sophistication of their vocabularies. In the winter of 2011, I interviewed three of the women (Irene was not available) about the value of literacy in their lives.

Learning from Mature Women

Kay Metcalfe, who was ninety-eight at the time of this group interview, spoke about the importance of reading and writing throughout her life. Kay, an active reader of current magazines and books, which she often borrowed from the Plainfield Library, was

in the habit of sharing her reactions to these sources with me and many others in town. Kay was also a regular writer in a variety of formats.

One writing project that had meant a great deal to her dealt with her grandfather's service in the Civil War as a young soldier. Soon after she and her husband retired, they took a car trip to trace the path of this man, who had recorded his experiences in letters and journals. After returning home, Kay self-published (using photocopying as the technology of the day) an elaborate book chronicling this journey. This book is still treasured in the family, and she was proud to share it with me.

In 1999, when she was eighty-six, Kay participated in a writing workshop for seniors in nearby Cummington, and then, in her nineties, she produced many writings about her perceptions of the aging process ([click here to read some of these writings](#)). Kay actively used writing to communicate with others and published some of her writings in local papers such as the *Plainfield Post* and *The Hampshire Gazette*.

Writing became even more important as Kay, a very social person, struggled with extreme hearing loss. In a writing dated July 20, 2010, she wrote: "My thoughts about my old age whirl about. The ears that don't hear are a basic problem. The effort involved place my personality awry and handling it does not offer a normal adjustment yet."

In another writing, which she mailed to friends and relatives, Kay attempted to express what she has learned in her ninety-seven years on this planet. Here is an excerpt from that piece, dated May 2010:

I have been allowed to live well into my 90's. There must be a good reason for this. Poor hearing, arthritic fingers, incontinence, etc. have placed me mostly into a new region of reading and reminiscing (facetiously called "out of the loop").

Fortunately, many, many million years ago, the Human Being learned how to form the sounds to create speech, also to the making of marks for writing so as to communicate with one another. It became important to teach their offspring much that they themselves had learned. How to make tools and how to live together assimilating what good things as values, virtues, and "bad" things were necessary for survival.

She went on to talk about her theory of “perpetual motion,” how the good and the bad are in constant flux, both necessary parts of life. As I read through Kay’s notes, letters to me, and philosophical writings, all done since she turned ninety, I couldn’t help thinking about those nuns with the “idea dense” autobiographies.

Blanche Cizek, ninety-one at the time of our group meeting, is another amazing elder though not as active a writer as Kay. She is an accomplished pianist, who sometimes fills in for the organist at the Plainfield Congregational Church—playing all the hymns and accompanying the choir. Although Blanche has enjoyed writing letters (some of them in Czech) throughout her life, it became clear during our interviews that, for her, reading is the most important literacy activity. As we talked, she kept getting up and going to get a book she had recently read or re-read. Every night before going to sleep she reads passages from the Bible, and she speaks with great interest and authority about this reading.

Anna Hathaway, eighty-one at the time of the group discussion, is the youngest participant and the only one who was born and raised in Plainfield. In my early years in town, I had known Anna’s mother, Dorothy Rice, who in her youth had been a schoolteacher at the local two-room schoolhouse. Even in her nineties, Dorothy regularly recited long poems at public gatherings. The Gettysburg Address, which she also delivered from memory, was a particular favorite. For Anna, literacy is clearly important. As she puts it, “I’d rather read than watch television. [pause] Except for baseball.”

Two things that stand out about Anna’s literacy are her delight in the humor of wordplay and her love for rhythm in poetry. I thought of Anna when reading a piece in the March 2011 NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] *Council Chronicle* entitled “Carrying Poetry Around: An Essay in Praise of Memorization.” The author, Terry Hermsen, who teaches at Otterbein College in Ohio, explains how much he treasures the poems he has memorized over the years, and how he encourages his young daughter to both memorize poems and make up her own. He concludes by saying that the practice of memorizing poems “may make a strand across time” (29). I certainly sense

this when I listen to Anna talk about her memories of being read to by her mother and her own love for poetry.

Key Role of Literacy Sponsors

These women's stories confirm one of most important tenets of literacy research—in particular, Deborah Brandt's notion of literacy sponsors. Each of the women had a significant literacy sponsor in her early life.

For Irene, it was a supportive family, especially her mother, who knew about early childhood pedagogy and ordered a Chautauqua desk to foster her daughter's literacy development as a very young child.

Kay also grew up in a supportive family, one that expected her to attend college “even though she was a girl.” Her most significant sponsor was a woman named Peggy Wilkerson, a professor she worked with in Montreal as a teaching assistant in a Parsons Art School program in interior architecture. She later worked as this woman's assistant at a college in Montreal. Kay recalls, “I learned so much from her. Really. It was amazing. I would never have learned [what I learned] in any other way.”

Blanche too came from a family that supported her literacy. Her Czech immigrant parents were very active in a local Czech theater group, and Blanche loved to listen to her mother practicing her lines while dusting and ironing. But because of the language barrier and because they were so busy trying to make ends meet in the new country, Blanche's parents did not read to her as a child. Her most important literacy sponsor was her piano teacher, a Moravian man who worked with her over many years.

When asked about literacy sponsors in her life, Anna mentioned her mother, Dorothy (born in 1894) as most important. Dorothy had been an elementary teacher before her forced “retirement” when she got married. But she continued to teach unofficially, reading to her own children and transmitting her love of stories and the humor one could find in literature. Anna spoke warmly of listening to her mother reading aloud. Special favorites were the Pooh books by A. A. Milne and the “Just So Stories” of Kipling. Anna was quick to point out that she too read these books to her children when

they were young. The original copies are now with her sister who lives in California and are clearly regarded as valuable family heirlooms.

When asked if she had other literacy sponsors, Anna mentioned Mrs. Arvilla Dyer, who had been her Sunday school teacher from the age of three onward. The Sunday school met in Mrs. Dyer's home near the church on Main Street, and Anna remembers that the children were expected to memorize Bible verses and then march around the room reciting them while Mrs. Dyer played the piano. Mrs. Dyer was also the Plainfield town librarian, and as such was an important literacy sponsor for many children in town. She eagerly supported a state program in which children kept track of all the books they read during summer vacation and received reading certificates of different values, depending on the number and difficulty of the books they read. A third literacy sponsor for Anna was Miss Addie Hall, her first-grade teacher. She doesn't remember any particular high school teachers (she went to high school in nearby Ashfield) as literacy sponsors. Instead, she said she got her love of literacy from "just everybody. Everybody read."

More than the other three women, Anna has used her literacy in public capacities in the town, serving as the Plainfield treasurer (an unpaid position), postmaster, librarian, and the volunteer "distributor" of the local biweekly newspaper, the *Plainfield Post*, an important job she still holds in 2016. Interestingly, it was Anna's literacy sponsors who helped her get some of these positions. For years she had been the assistant to long-time postmaster Jeanna Carver, and when Jeanna retired, she designated Anna as her successor without the need to take the Civil Service exam. Similarly, when Mrs. Dyer died at her post at the library desk at age ninety-five in 1976, Anna automatically became the new librarian. Before her death, Mrs. Dyer had made her wishes for her chosen replacement known to the authorities in Boston.

Now Anna herself has become an important literacy sponsor for many others in town, sharing books and articles she thinks we might be interested in. She has an almost uncanny knack for knowing who would be interested in reading what.

Exclusion from Modern Technology

The one area where all of the women feel excluded from literacy is technology—computers and new media. In an interview conducted in the summer of 2007, I asked Kay to talk about important changes she had seen in her lifetime. She answered without hesitation: “Oh, I think the biggest change is this dotcom stuff. . . . And it’s getting bigger [said with emphasis]. I just read something about a young kid who’s twenty-three who’s developed something that’s called Facebook. You know, to me, it has no virtue of any kind. Does it?” I went on to talk about the power of the new technology, and how there are good and bad sides to it. Kay continued, “They said it’s going to change the world. . . . I wonder how it will change the social life of people. How is it going to change their culture?”

Like Kay, Blanche is suspicious of the new technology. In an interview, she mentioned that she felt completely intimidated by computers: “I feel that I’m out of the mainstream. . . . It’s a little bit frustrating. Not being able to understand. On the other hand, I don’t know that I want to. It would be wonderful to send an email. Somebody will write me a note or a Christmas card and say, ‘Send me your email so we can correspond.’ Well, I don’t have email. So it’s a little frustrating. . . . Things are happening at such a rapid pace that it’s almost impossible to keep things in sequence. We’re bombarded from the radio, we’re bombarded from the TV. All of these terrible tragedies. Things come to your mind that are pretty stressful. And the rapidity of all of this.” She went on to talk about “this new Apple thing”—the i-Pad.

It’s revealing of the continued active involvement of Kay and Blanche that even though they themselves don’t use computers, they were very aware of recent technology breakthroughs shortly after they came into existence: For Kay, Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook and, for Blanche, the Apple i-Pad.

Anna, who is ten years younger than Blanche, is also resistant to computer technology and pointed out that she managed to retire from her jobs as postmaster and librarian just as these occupations were becoming more computerized. When we spoke in February 2011, she mentioned that her daughter and son-in-law were buying a new

computer and wanted to give her their old one, but she had rejected the offer. “I have fat thumbs,” she said. “I can’t deal with all those little keys.”

Implications

What do these women’s stories have to teach us about literate development across the lifespan and the value of literacy in old age?

First, literacy is not something that starts in later life. It begins at birth and develops at different rates and in different ways depending on the individual and the environment.

Literacy scholar Deborah Brandt states that “literacy looms as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth century” (18). But although the four women in this study had important “sponsors” and were—and are—clearly “invested” in their reading and writing, it is also clear that, for them, literacy has much more than an economic value. I was struck by just how much our language has been shaped by the language of the marketplace, the language of capitalism, when I tried to come up with a term that adequately describes the role of literacy in these women’s lives today. “Enrichment”? A “valuable resource”? I couldn’t seem to get away from economic metaphors.

What do these women’s stories as readers and writers imply about the importance of literacy in the twenty-first century? Obviously, teachers and schools aren’t the only important sponsors of literacy. Being born into a family that nurtures literacy is a great advantage. However, several of the women I interviewed also mentioned teachers as important literacy sponsors, and there is much that enlightened schools and dedicated teachers can do to encourage literacy. The experiences of the women in this study suggest that literacy provides lasting benefits, far more important than test scores or educational outcomes that can be neatly assessed and entered in an Excel file. As the American population gets progressively older, it will be important for society to plan for and invest resources in developing literacy—a love for reading and writing that will last a lifetime—in all young people, not just the children of the privileged few.

Note: A version of this essay was presented as “Literacy for the Ages: Looking at Literate Development Across the Lifespan” on April 7, 2011, at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Atlanta.

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