

New perspectives on literacy

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Introduction

The traditional definition of literacy and what it means to be literate has expired. Text no longer refers to just the written or spoken word. Instead, modern literacy recognises the range of, linguistic, visual audio, gestural, and spatial texts that individuals and larger entities use to communicate meaning for different purposes. In the last decade the dominance of modern communication and information technologies across society have compelled educators to reconsider what it means for learners to be 'literate'.

Traditional Literacy

Traditional literacy was concerned with the technologies of print on paper because literacy was defined as reading and writing alphabetic texts, some of which contained illustrations or photos. The focus of literacy teaching and learning was on interpreting the one meaning of the printed word. Reading visual images, and the influence of page layout on meaning, were seldom considered. This approach to literacy reflected a world where jobs were secure and only basic literacy skills with the technologies of the day were required.

From a social perspective, fifty years ago radio was the main source of news, information, music, serialized stories and children's programs. Although the technology of television arrived in 1950's, few could afford to have it in their homes. Therefore, the modes of literacy at this time were largely concerned with print, listening and speaking.

Modern Literacy

Advances in technology have produced a convergence of purpose between *information* and *communication* technologies. Digital television, mobile devices can now screen broadcast media (free-to-air TV), cable TV, the Internet, computer games, and social networking. Therefore, obtaining information from a single piece of equipment, which incorporates multiple technologies, requires the use of a variety of literate and social behaviours. Consequently, reading now involves viewing still and moving images, and recognizing and interpreting symbols and icons.

A modern definition of literacy is broad to the point where it recognises the strong connection between literate practices and cultural and social behaviours. Consider the way different indigenous and religious groups express meaning through dance and visual art. Or the way relationships are maintained through the accessibility of social networking technologies. Such realities suggest that the repertoire of linguistic skills that individuals now require not only include traditional texts, but encompass an extensive range of modern and traditional texts.

It is then recognized that, while some texts stand alone, others combine to form multimodal forms of text, such as comic books, social networking websites and mobile technologies. These texts express meaning through different multimodal media within different social and cultural contexts. As discussed by Cope and Kalantzis (2000) they include:

Linguistic	language in cultural contexts
Visual	seeing and viewing.
Audio	hearing and sound.
Gestural	movement and shape.
Spatial	space and place.

What does it mean to be literate?

Modern literacy suggests that learners need to develop an array of literacy skills in order to gain meaning from texts. Teachers require a balanced framework on which to apply this process. The Four Resources Model (Luke and Freebody, 1999) provides teachers with a balanced framework, which divides the repertoire of literacy practices into four learner roles;

Roles	Practices
<p>Code Breaker: The practices required to decode a range of texts.</p>	<p>Recognising such grammatical structures as questions, statements and commands.</p> <p>Using pace, volume, pronunciation and stress appropriately in speech.</p> <p>Using cues arising from written and visual symbols.</p>
<p>Meaning Maker (as Text Participant): The practices required to build and construct social and cultural meaning from texts.</p>	<p>Identifying the main idea and supporting details in text.</p> <p>Predicting meaning by using text cues.</p> <p>Inferring text meanings from context.</p> <p>Matching multimodal information such as symbols or diagrams to traditional textual information.</p>
<p>Text User: The practices required to use texts effectively in everyday situations and for different cultural and social functions.</p>	<p>Creating, sharing and appreciating texts.</p> <p>Utilizing texts for specific social and cultural purposes.</p>
<p>Text Analyst: The practices required to analyse, critique and second-guess texts.</p>	<p>Comparing the cultural conventions of transactions in different languages.</p> <p>Recognising the transferability of literacy skills from language to language.</p> <p>Analyse and unpack texts to become aware of how they convey meaning.</p>

Summary

This article has suggested that the traditional definition of literacy and what it means to be literate has expired. Texts no longer refers to just the written or spoken word. Modern technologies in particular have brought to light the rapidly changing way that people, society, cultural groups, and larger entities combine and use texts for social and cultural purposes. The new definition of what it means to be literate suggests that it is fundamental that learners acquire a range of literacy practices so that they can decode, comprehend, use, and critically analyse a range of, often integrated, linguistic, visual audio, gestural, and spatial texts.

Questions for discussion

- Discuss the different ways that you have communicated with others in the last day?
- Is the way you communicate with one group/individual different from another? How?
- How have literacy practices changed in your cultural, social, economic settings? Why?
- Examine again the The Four Resources Model (Luke and Freebody, 1999). What roles/practices do you think are most important for EFL learners to acquire and why?
- The Four Resources Model suggests that learners need to critically analyse texts and recognise the features of texts used to convey different meaning. Why might this be important?

References

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. New York: Routledge

Luke, A. & Freebody, P. (1999). Further notes on the four resources model. *Reading Online*. Retrieved March 5, 2009, from <http://www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html>