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Key idea: **Literacy**

Isn't literacy just about learning to read and write?

Few educational practices have greater ability to prompt passionate debate than the teaching of reading and writing.

No educational practice is neutral. All learning is based on some assumptions and the process of becoming literate is no exception. Even arriving at a definition of what it means to be literate is not straightforward, as you will discover in this chapter. Each day-to-day practice that you perhaps take for granted in our schools is the product of sometimes fiercely contested social and political processes. Few educational practices have greater ability to prompt passionate debate than the teaching of reading and writing.

Today we regard 'literacy' as a highly desirable condition and 'illiteracy' is portrayed as a scandal, disease or epidemic to be eliminated at all costs. Prior to the twentieth century, however, it was feared that mass literacy might lead to social unrest, by raising the expectations of the poor through access to subversive and radical literature and encouraging them to question the political and social status quo. The notion that literacy should be acquired in early childhood and that an individual's failure to do so would have calamitous consequences, for them personally and for society as a whole, is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Three main reasons are usually offered for the importance of mass literacy. These are linked to the economic and social well-being of the state and to personal advancement. It is now held to be self-evident that a literate workforce is a productive workforce; essential to a nation's economic well being. The performance of students, relative to those from other countries in international league tables of literacy, is watched anxiously and slippage 'down the international tables' is a matter for media comment and political concern. Secondly, literacy is seen as a social good. Links have been made between childhood poverty and low literacy levels and there is particular anxiety regarding the high levels of illiteracy among inmates of prisons. Young white males from lower socio-economic classes and indigenous young people in particular are believed to be marginalised through their poor literacy skills and resulting exclusion from employment and education. Finally, literacy is valued as a route to self-actualisation. Personal fulfilment is held to be a direct consequence of literacy and is linked to an individual's ability to read and write fluently for pleasure, for personal empowerment, to express creativity and to engage fully in a world dominated by print.

So far you have considered the socio-cultural ideology behind the concept of new literacies and thought about the extent to which educational practice is influenced by events and ideas beyond the classroom. In the following section you will begin to identify just what else is *new* about *new literacies*.

Key idea: **Texts: range and meaning**

You have already come across a number of definitions of literacy drawn from a variety of sources and here is one more: Lankshear and Knobel define literacies as “socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts within contexts of participation in Discourses” (2010, 64).

By this definition, they explain, three concepts are implied. Firstly, individuals can be said to engage in literacy when they apply their knowledge and skills to accomplish tasks in purposeful and socially recognised ways. This includes through the use of technology, as well as via the printed word. Secondly, *texts* are defined as consisting of any idea is encoded in a form that allows it to be retrieved even when the ‘encoder’ is not present in person. So, for example, “someone who ‘freezes’ language as a digitally encoded passage of speech and uploads it to the Internet as a podcast, is engaging in literacy” (2010, 225).

Thirdly, they emphasise the *discursive* nature of literacy. Literacy is not a standalone skill but is dependent upon meaning and meaning is always socially negotiated. You are probably familiar with ‘*textese*’, the abbreviated form of writing used on mobile phones and in instant messaging, designed originally to fit long messages into limited character sets. An example is “*CU l8tr 2nt m8*” that can be decoded as “*see you later tonight, mate*”. If you are a confident texter, you will not only know at once what the message means, but also will probably be able to tell straight away that it has been written by someone who is not entirely at ease with *textese*. If you come across *textese* in a socially inappropriate context, such as a job application or examination paper, then you will draw conclusions about the writer, without even having met them. If a teacher uses *textese* in your assignment feedback or when marking a child’s homework you will draw conclusions about them too.

Critical thinking exercise 4

Think of an occasion when you have misinterpreted a message or been misinterpreted by someone else. This might be an occasion when the actual words used convey a message that is different to the literal meaning. For example, a parent asking, “What time will you be home tonight?” to a young teenager might really be saying, “Please take care while you are out because I am worried about you”. Think about what the meaning received by the teenager might be.

Discuss how many different meanings may be intended or received, depending on context, by the simple question “Would you like a coffee?” You might also consider whether there is any cultural or contextual significance in being offered a coffee, rather than ‘a nice cup of tea’.

New surfaces and media

- Symbols appear on screen in response to physical actions such as typing on a keyboard or selecting options from with the click of a mouse or the use of a touch screen.
- Texts are often read as a scroll and subdivided with page breaks.
- Digital texts can be changed and copied, but cannot be touched in their original form. Changes are easily made, for example font colour, style and size.
- Visual and audio material is easily incorporated to create multi-modal texts.
- Hyperlinks can be inserted to link between documents or to provide access to the Internet.
- Screens, especially larger ones, are often seen as more public surfaces for writing, which help and/or promote encourage collaboration or collaborative work.
- Power and connectivity is required.
- Compared to pen and paper the screen is a very different surface for writing.

Writing tools and ways of using them

- Various electronic writing devices with differing levels of portability are available, ranging from mobile hand-held devices to desktop PCs; these make it possible to be writing 'on the move' and in a range of locations.
- Different tools are used to write or 'act on' screen writing, such as touch screen technology, mouse, stylus, keyboard, roller ball and joystick.
- Writing tools may have multiple functions. For example, keys on a keyboard or buttons on a mobile phone can perform a variety of actions.
- The physical actions for text production on screen, i.e. the use of fingers and thumbs differ from those required to control a pencil.
- Different holding and carrying actions as well as different physical positions are used when using new technologies to write on screen.
- The physical handling and use of material objects associated with traditional paper-based writing tasks, such as paper and scissors, differs considerably when writing on screen.

Merchant (2005b) found that young children demonstrated a growing understanding of what it is like to write on screen. They needed little encouragement to engage with technologies such as computers and mobile phones and confidently carried out basic operations such as pressing keys and deleting text. The development of keyboard skills is helpful, especially as children's confidence with technology grows and the following links to online games are useful for developing such skills:

http://www.learninggamesforkids.com/keyboarding_games/keyboarding_games_typing_adventure1.html

<http://www.typingmaster.com/games/typing-games.asp>

This chapter will consider four key points that build together to develop an understanding of information literacy. First is the idea of information filters, which will include a discussion of the organisational filters that exist that limit the range of information that we are exposed to. This will then lead into an exploration of different ways of viewing information literacy and the implications that this has for teaching and learning. Following on from this will be a more detailed discussion of elements or frames (Bruce et al. 2006) of information literacy, which is continued by a more detailed discussion of elements or frames (Bruce et al. 2006) of information literacy. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an exploration of the role of the creation of information as a key element of information literacy.

There is any number of websites available via a quick Internet search that quote staggering figures for the amount of information that is generated annually and how this increases year by year. We clearly live in an information rich age and you may have come across phrases such as ‘information overload’ or ‘information abundance’, which create images of us being overwhelmed by information or having more of it than we could possibly ever need. Thus, it would logically follow that it would be helpful to be information literate in order to effectively interact with this information.

It is worth taking time to consider what is meant by information and some of its characteristics. You might like to stop reading for a while and make a list of things that you would consider information. It would be easy to imagine that many lists would contain things like facts and figures, news, non-fiction books etc. However, I wonder if you would have things such as famous art works or song lyrics in the list. Whitworth (2009) considers information to be the product that arises when humans interact with their environment, which is a very broad definition but I think it serves very well. For example, consider an explorer in an unexplored part of a rainforest; as they move about they see, hear, smell, feel and possibly taste the environment around them. They might sketch, photograph, video, collect samples or write descriptions of the environment and it is these interactions that would give rise to information about this new environment. In a similar way, an artist who experiences the world around them and then attempts to represent these experiences through the medium of their art is generating information. The purpose of this discussion has been to emphasise that information is more than simply facts and figures and needs to be thought of in broader terms to avoid constraining information literacy into something as limited as ‘how to read an encyclopedia’.

Whitworth (2009) uses the term “information obesity” to describe the abundance of easily available and frequently low quality information that is available. Debates about public health and obesity often cite the need for people to make informed choices about their food consumption and criticise organisations that market foods low in nutrition but high in calories. Pursuing this analogy would suggest that consumers of information need to be informed in order to make the best use possible of available information – in other words they need to be information literate.

Key idea: **Information filters**

It would not be unreasonable of you to question the need for information literacy, particularly if you have access to an Internet-enabled smart-phone. You might be able to recall a recent occasion when you wanted to check a train time, find all the films an actor had starred in or find a recipe and you have gone to an Internet search engine in order to quickly and easily find the information you needed in order to get a solution to your query. You might have simply clicked on the top search result to find this solution and not visited any other results to cross check. However, I wonder if you would buy clothes in the same way? Would you walk into a shopping centre, go to the store with the biggest name and largest store front, walk in, ask for some clothes in your size and buy without trying them on or considering alternatives? This section addresses the notion of what information is available to you and why this might be different to the information that exists.

Before reading on, place a bookmark on this page, close the book, close your eyes and listen. Think about what you can hear and what it tells you about what is going on around you. Continue listening and try to focus on those sounds that you were not aware of before when you were reading. Perhaps you became aware of the sound of traffic, music or TV. It is highly probable that once you began to focus on sounds then you began to be aware of more than you originally thought. This is not because the sounds were not there before; it is because your brain was filtering them out.¹ Hopefully, this brief activity will have emphasised the point that there is so much information available to us that we have to filter it in order to be able to carry out our daily lives. As well as this sort of filtering, which is done to reduce the cognitive load on our brains, we also make use of a cognitive bias known as the confirmation bias. This is where we seek information that fits with our existing thoughts and knowledge base; in other words we are predisposed to accept information that confirms what we already think and know. A classic example of this concerns gun control in the USA, where those in favour of one side of the argument will accept and believe information that supports their belief and will disregard information that does not. Basically, we are not really very good at listening to both sides of an argument if we have already formed an opinion. You might find that you read a particular newspaper as it favours your political viewpoint: this is an example of the confirmation bias in action. All of this is important as we need to be aware that as a species, humans have some flaws when it comes to dealing with the information that is available to them and recognising this is an important aspect of information literacy. However, as has already been explained, being able to filter information makes it possible for us to cope with day-to-day life. Indeed, Whitworth (2009, 3) states, “filtering is the fundamental basis for any relationship with information”. But there are other ways that information is filtered and an understanding of these will help with later discussions about information literacy.

In order to understand the way in which information is filtered, it is necessary to take a step back and think a little about the role of society and culture and how power is allocated within these. (If this is of interest to you then you would do well to start by reading Hall (1980) who was a pioneer in the area of cultural studies.) Livingstone (2003) makes a key point when she notes that for information in print or audio-visual form (as opposed to Internet-based information) the means of producing these

¹An excellent example of selective attention can be found here: www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vJG698U2Mvo

Critical thinking exercise 3

- A. **Articulate** what you see as the links between music and literacy. Take each of the quotes above in turn and say why you think these conclusions have been drawn.
- B. **Discuss** how music can promote children's learning in literacy.
- C. **Examine** your own use of music and technology to support children's literacy development.
- D. **Consider** any additional pedagogical interventions that could enhance your classroom practice.

Comment

Links between music and literacy

Hansen and Bernstorff (2002, 2) identify a number of similarities in the way we learn music and how we learn to read.

“ Most basic skills used in text reading or decoding, i.e. the breaking of the visual code of symbols into sounds, find parallels in music reading. Instrumentalists and vocalists read music symbols. In choral music, one must additionally read text or lyrics as they correspond to the musical symbols. ”

Their ideas are confirmed by a number of research studies (Bolduc and Fleuret 2009; McIntire 2007; Dyer 2011), which indicate links between certain musical abilities and young children's early literacy development. For example, children who are able to discriminate one pitch from another and show awareness of differences in musical duration were found to be more phonologically aware. Musical activities were also found to have an impact on children's ability to identify rhymes and syllables and to recognise and decode words which all had a positive effect on children's reading and writing skills.

In contrast, Salmon (2010) identified the use of music and sound as a means of literacy engagement rather than helping to develop children's phonemic awareness. Think about the following for a moment:

- The soundtracks of *Jaws* and *Chariots of Fire*
- The sound of bagpipes or the didgeridoo
- The National Anthem
- The song from the first dance at yours or a friend's wedding
- Sounds of children's voices (from a school or children's playground)
- Sounds of waves lapping on the shore and seagulls crying
- A scream
- Laughter