

CHAPTER 1

Literacy in the Modern World

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The definition of literacy is not static. It changes and evolves to reflect the changing needs of society.

In the past, definitions of literacy focused on only the ability to read and write print texts, but these definitions are no longer enough for the modern world. As Snyder pointed out in *Silicon Literacies*:

We need an expanded definition which recognises that reading and writing, considered as print-based and logocentric, are only part of what people have to learn to be literate. Now, for the first time in history, the written, oral and audiovisual modalities of communication are integrated into multimodal hypertext systems made accessible via the Internet and the World Wide Web. (2002, p. 3)

Whatever definition we choose, it must include those facets of literacy as we know it today: not only the basic view of literacy as the ability to read and write but also what are termed social literacy, critical literacy, mathematical literacy, cultural literacy and technological literacy. Essential to all aspects of literacy in Australia, nevertheless, is the ability to read and write in English.

Current views of 'literacy' refer to the ways the language-based processes of reading, writing and digital communication are integrated in acts of making and sharing meaning. Literacy is no longer seen as isolated bits of knowledge, such as grammar or spelling, but as the ability to use language purposefully and skilfully in many different situations and for many different purposes.

The literacy definition of Allan Luke and Peter Freebody reflects this changing face of literacy as it is used by individuals to meet a variety of needs within a dynamic society:

Literacy is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia. (2000, www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html)

Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possesses a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies are multiple, dynamic and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Active, successful participants in this 21st-century global society must be able to:

- develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology
- build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought
- design and share information with global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- manage, analyse and synthesise multiple streams of simultaneous information
- create, critique, analyse and evaluate multimedia texts
- attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

The importance of literacy

Literacy is integral to success in modern society. It pervades almost every area of social interaction including education, work, leisure, communications and business, and is a key component of the information revolution.

■ Literacy is a fundamental human right.

■ Literacy is embedded in our everyday lives.

Competence in literacy is essential if an individual is to participate fully in modern society—able to take part in the workforce, engage in democratic processes and contribute to society. Literacy is also an essential component of social justice. It enables individuals to gain access to social resources and helps them to participate in social institutions. It can be a source of enjoyment and can contribute to individuals' widening knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world.

Literacy is crucial to young people's success at school. Students with effective literacy skills excel not only in English but also in other areas of the curriculum. Students' overall school performance and their successful transition from one stage of schooling to the next depend on a well-developed foundation of literacy skills and on the positive attitudes to learning that accompany these skills. Students need to have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and understandings to engage with the literacy demands of all of the differing components of the curriculum and to participate effectively in society. Denise Lievesley and Albert Motivans state: 'Literacy plays an essential role in improving the lives of individuals by enabling economic security and good health, and enriches societies by building human capital, fostering cultural identity and tolerance, and promoting civic participation' (2002, p. 8).

Most governments throughout the world give a high priority to the development of literacy skills in their populations. As part of basic education, literacy is seen as a key factor in a country's social and economic development. UNESCO, as part of its education strategy, sees literacy as 'a fundamental human right'.

The former Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, on International Literacy Day (2009) focused on the empowering role of literacy:

Literacy gives people tools with which to improve their livelihoods, participate in community decision-making, gain access to information about health care, and much else besides. Above all, it enables individuals to realize their rights as citizens and human beings.

Literacy as social practice

We can think of literacy not merely as a single skill, or even a set of skills, but as a way of operating in the world with a variety of texts to get things done and achieve our purposes. Whenever we use literacy we do so in the context of a social practice. We don't 'do' literacy; rather, we engage in social situations of which literacy is an integral part. Literacy is embedded in the practices of our everyday lives. When we buy a car, do the shopping, visit the doctor or pay a bill, we engage in social practices in which literacy is embedded.

There are culturally accepted ways of engaging in social practices and these can vary across cultures and over time. Greeting people, talking on the phone, banking online, sending text messages and shopping are social practices that vary across cultures and have changed over time. When these practices involve literacy, the forms of literacy also vary from culture to culture and from situation to situation. Out of a need to achieve these social purposes we reach for the skills of literacy.

Teaching children to be literate, therefore, should not be seen merely as providing them with a set of skills to transfer from situation to situation. Rather, it should involve teaching them about how to participate in, understand and gain control of the social practices of their society and the literacy practices that are embedded in them. As James Gee says in his foreword to Lewis's *Literacy Practices as Social Acts*:

Literacy-related social practices almost always involve a good many other things besides written language. They almost always include and integrate, along with written language, specific and characteristic ways of talking, acting, interacting, thinking, feeling, valuing, and using various sorts of symbols and tools. Becoming a participant in a specific social practice requires access offered by those already adept at the practice or those who 'own' and control it. (Lewis 2001)

Allan Luke and Peter Freebody take this concept further:

History teaches us that 'literacy' refers to a malleable set of cultural practices that are shaped and re-shaped by different, often competing, social and cultural interests. As a result we do not view how to teach literacy as a 'scientific' decision, but rather as a moral, political and cultural decision about the kind of literate practices that are needed to enhance people's agency over their life trajectories and to enhance communities' intellectual, cultural and semiotic resources in print/multi-mediated economies. Literacy education is ultimately about the kinds of

■ We use literacy to achieve social purposes.

citizens/subjects that could and should be constructed. Teaching and learning isn't just a matter of skill acquisition and knowledge transmission or natural growth. It's about building identities and cultures, communities and institutions. And 'failure' at literacy isn't about individual skill deficits—it's about access and apprenticeship into institutions and resources, discourses and texts. (1995, p. 5)

Literacy and text

At the centre of an understanding of literacy is the concept of 'text'. A text is, essentially, any spoken, written, audio or visual communication involving language. Many texts in modern society use varying combinations of all these modes. We construct or interpret texts as part of engaging in social practices of which the text plays a part. For example, when we go shopping we interact with a range of texts as an integral part of that action: texts such as our shopping list, product labels, price tags, advertising signs or the growing total of our purchases on the checkout computer. And we interpret these texts in relation to our purpose; for example, 'How much sugar is in that brand of breakfast cereal?', 'Can I afford that coffee?'

When we construct texts we make choices from the resources of the language system and from a range of image forms to achieve our particular social purposes. We decide how to present our texts using oral, written, audio or visual means or a combination of these, depending on our purpose and audience. We create meaning from texts when we listen, read or view texts constructed by others, interpreting them within our particular social and cultural context.

The aim of any literacy program, therefore, should be to teach students to construct a wide range of texts, and to interpret a wide range of texts constructed by others within and beyond the social and cultural contexts in which they live.

Literacy and technology

■ The digital age extends our literate practices.

Literacy has always been closely bound up with technology. From earliest times, people have used technologies such as the clay tablet and papyrus to record ideas and stories, to save information, and to communicate across time and space. Over time, technological inventions such as the printing press, fountain and ballpoint pens, and the telephone prompted huge changes in the ways literacy, as part of social interaction, was practised.

The impact of the internet and technology on all aspects of life has been increasing geometrically in terms of its progression and disruption. Digital technologies have exponentially changed our lives, impacting our social and business interactions. For example:

- 1 Social networking tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp and Snapchat have changed our capacity to connect with millions of text creators and responders globally.
- 2 Online gaming and game development, a billion-dollar industry larger than the film industry, is changing the role of the viewer to that of interactive participant.
- 3 Streaming services enable access to sound, film and video on demand anywhere, anytime.

- 4 Film/video can be user created and shared to millions via YouTube.
- 5 Virtual reality challenges our perception of what is real and what is digitally created.
- 6 Artificial intelligence can create texts and respond.
- 7 Coding itself has been heralded as a new literacy.

Electronic technologies are part of the long list of technological advances called into the service of literate societies to improve their ability to communicate. But these new electronic technologies have opened the door to a whole new world of communication possibilities. It is important to point out, however, that the literacy practices that have developed alongside the technological inventions have done so because they met the needs of socially grounded communication.

When we make use of the new technologies to engage in information-gathering and communication activities we are using literacy in new ways. When we use a mobile phone and send text messages, browse the net, send emails, bank and shop online, or download content, we are using the new technologies to meet our communication needs. New possibilities open up to us new ways of meeting socially grounded communication needs and these require, inevitably, new knowledge and skills. We need to learn how these new text forms are structured and what conventions apply to their use. We need to learn how these text forms operate in culturally significant ways to empower individuals and groups in society.

As Snyder says:

Central to all these changes is the altering of the landscape of representation and communication. We are in the midst of a shift from an era of mass communication to an era of individuated communication; from unidirectional communication from the centre to the mass, to multidirectional communication from many locations; from the 'passive' audience to the 'interactive' audience. (2002, p. 179)

And further:

In an electronically mediated world, being literate is to do with understanding how the different modalities are combined in complex ways to create meaning. People have to learn to make sense of the iconic systems evident in computer displays—with all the combination of signs, symbols, pictures, words and sounds. Language is no longer just grammar, lexicon and semantics: language now comprises a wider range of semiotic systems that cut across reading, writing, viewing and speaking. What looks like the same text or multimedia genre on paper or on screen is not functionally the same. It follows different meaning conventions and requires different skills for its successful use. Further, it operates in different social networks for different purposes as part of different human activities. Understanding these multimodal texts requires an interdisciplinary range of methods of analysis: linguistic, semiotic, social, cultural, historical and critical. (p. 3)

We are facing a new world of literacy, a world in which the literacy skills of the paper-based text are no longer enough. Along with traditional literacy skills, we must now include facility with the many multimodal literacy practices that are made possible by the new technologies. No matter what technology is used, however, understanding and using language in appropriate contexts is crucial to the development of literacy.

Literacy and the school curriculum

Literacy is an integral part of learning in all subject areas. However, it is incorrect to assume that the general skills in literacy learnt in the early years—the ability to decode and to read and write simple texts, to spell and to understand aspects of grammar—will be sufficient for coping with the subject-specific demands of literacy in the middle and later primary years and in secondary school.

Each subject has distinctive ways of constructing and using texts and, as students progress through school, the features of these texts become more specialised and distinct. These include specific text structures and ways of combining images and print, specific ways of using grammar and distinct vocabulary.

As Peter Freebody argued in a paper delivered at the National Literacy and Numeracy Week NSW Conference, 2009:

So, academic development in the curriculum areas is not somehow separate from developing students' knowledge about literacy conventions. The curriculum disciplines, as we have known them in some cases for hundreds of years, would not exist without the technologies of literacy, nor would societies such as ours have any way of passing them on to subsequent generations if we did not have the technologies of literacy. Accessing those kinds of texts is the ongoing literacy challenge for schools; it's the culmination of the work that's laid down in the early years, but it's a new kind of literacy work. (www.nlnw.nsw.edu.au/videos09/lo_Freebody_Literacy/documents/Freebody_literacy.pdf)

Understanding how texts in these different subject disciplines work, how they are structured, how they use different vocabulary and grammatical features and how they employ visual features are crucial to being able to use them in the learning situations that students face. In many cases, assessment in these disciplines is carried out via assignments or tasks that require the replication of the text features that are specific to the discipline.

Education Victoria describes Literacy across the curriculum as follows:

Literacy across the curriculum requires children and young people to have skills which enable them to interpret and compose texts across different disciplines. This involves teaching that prompts learning that

- embeds a grasp of how different language choices and patterns represent and document ideas and views of the world through a range of genres
- develops a sense of the way disciplinary knowledge is organised (for example, in science, history or geography).

Each subject or discipline, such as Science or History, has its own distinctive literacy demands (Christie & Derewianka, 2008). ... [and] requires students to have literacy skills which enable them to interpret and compose texts across different disciplines. This involves teaching about how different language choices and patterns represent and document ideas and views of the world through a range of genres. It requires developing a sense of the way disciplinary knowledge is organised, for example in science or history or geography.

Literacy standards

As research from UNESCO shows, nations around the world are not witnessing a large and visible downturn in literacy standards—on the contrary, levels of literacy, particularly for young people, are rising steadily. However, there are still huge differences in the levels of literacy between developed and developing countries and, in some countries, between males and females and young and old, and there is still a long way to go before literacy is achieved throughout the world.

It is significant that, in the modern world, literacy demands are increasing and there is now a demand for greater and more sophisticated literacy skills related to the increased variety and complexity in the ways literacy is used. This places schools and teachers in a pivotal position to assist students to attain the levels and varieties of literacy they will need in the 21st century.

Since 2000 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has carried out the Programme for International Student Assessment Survey (PISA) every three years. This survey of 15-year-olds is held in many developed countries throughout the world, including Australia, to assist governments to monitor the outcomes of education related to an internationally accepted framework. In 2015 more than 540 000 students in 72 countries participated.

In setting up the PISA program, *Knowledge and Skills for Life*, the OECD asks:

Are students well prepared to meet the challenges of the future? Are they able to analyse, reason and communicate their ideas effectively? Do they have the capacity to continue learning throughout life? These are questions that parents, students, the public and those who run education systems continually ask. (OECD 2001)

The PISA Assessment Report, published after every PISA assessment, presents evidence on student performance in reading, mathematics and scientific literacy, reveals factors that influence the development of these skills at home and at school, and examines the implications for policy development. Detailed results can be found on the OECD website at www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results.htm. This website allows you to look closely at the data, compare Australian results with those of other systems, and even take the PISA test questions yourself.

The 2015 survey assessed not only what students know and can do but also features of a school and its environment such as equity across the school system, students' engagement, motivation and drive to learn and the resources, policies and practices that make schools successful.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), in its report on Australia's performance in PISA 2015 in Reading Literacy, stated that:

Australian students achieved an average score of 503 points in reading literacy, which was significantly higher than the OECD average of 493 points.

The reading literacy performance for Australia and eight other countries declined significantly between 2009 and 2015. Australia's performance declined by 12 points.

■ Literacy standards are increasing worldwide.

Between PISA 2000 and 2015, reading literacy performance of Australian females declined significantly (by 27 points) and the performance of males declined significantly (by 25 points).

Indigenous students achieved significantly lower scores than non-Indigenous students in the scientific, reading and mathematical literacy domains.

Between PISA 2000 and 2015, the reading literacy performance of Indigenous students has not changed significantly, while there was a significant decline (by 25 points) in the performance of non-Indigenous students.

Students in metropolitan schools performed significantly higher than students from provincial schools or remote schools, while students from provincial schools performed at a statistically similar level to students from remote schools.

On average, students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds performed at a significantly higher level than students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

These figures show that:

- the performance of Australian students has declined between 2000 and 2015
- the performance of different groups across Australia is not equal.

The way forward

What literacy skills will be needed for participation in society in the next decades of the 21st century? How will these skills be measured? How will we ensure that all children have access to the most advanced literacy learning? It is clear that the solution lies in a multifaceted approach.

Gonski panellist and world-renowned educator Dr Ken Boston's article in *The Australian* of 16 February 2013 titled 'School results tell the story: the funding model has failed' argues that lifting the performance of Australian students will require extra funding and resources allocated to schools serving students who need extra support to perform at the same level as their peers. He adds:

Across the world, there is a positive correlation between socioeconomic disadvantage and educational performance: in Australia, socioeconomic disadvantage has a greater adverse effect on educational achievement than in any other comparable OECD country.

These issues are further explored in the Separating Scholars Discussion Paper (2019) from the Centre for Policy Development in Australia. End-of-school measures of achievement were studied in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria to identify the relationship between school achievement and other school characteristics such as student advantage and location. The study found:

Increasingly, we can see high achievers concentrated in the most advantaged schools, while those in lower SES schools are facing falling achievement levels. ... Even more significantly, such gaps have been widening over the last decade. This has been accompanied by a change in the distribution of enrolments to these schools, so that increasingly the most advantaged students are going to the most advantaged schools ...

■ In Australia, socioeconomic disadvantage has a greater adverse effect on educational achievement than in any other comparable OECD country.

There is also a stark difference between the cities and regional areas, with the proportion of DAs (Distinguished Achievers) in major cities in NSW at 23%, but only 2.3% in inner regional areas, and just 0.3% in outer regional areas.

The data suggest that achievement outcomes are becoming increasingly connected to the level of advantage of the school a student attends, so that some of the differences in achievement among schools may simply reflect who is enrolled – and how this enrolment is changing – rather than the quality of teaching.

The Australian Government’s Department of Education, in its National Partnership for Teacher Quality Project 2012–2013 states: ‘Evidence shows that quality teaching can overcome location and other disadvantages and is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and achievement.’

And Preschools NSW, in its wide-ranging review into school readiness, found:

There is consistent international evidence that children who have participated in high-quality preschool education programs gain significant long-term benefits from what has been termed the ‘preschool advantage’ (Farrar, et al, 2007).

While the evidence indicates that all children benefit from high quality preschool education, the gains are greatest for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds (Cunha, et al, 2006; Sylva, et al, 2004).

In addition, national and international testing programs show that Australian students who achieve levels of literacy below those of their same-age peers are most likely to be:

- students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent
- students from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- students in regional and remote areas
- students with disabilities.

Therefore, education authorities at national, state and territory levels need to recognise that improvement in overall literacy levels for Australia as a whole requires a targeted, multifaceted approach that addresses a range of factors if it is to be successful.

This approach should include the following components.

Focus on students who need extra support

It is clear from the evidence that Indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, students with disabilities and students from regional and remote areas need extra support to reach the levels of achievement of their peers. This extra support should be based on their individual needs and targeted to their levels of achievement.

Schools that cater for large numbers of students who require support in literacy learning have a heavier burden of assessment and specialist teaching placed on their often slender resources. They need extra resources to lift their students’ achievement levels; resources that may include:

- specialist literacy teachers to work closely with students
- high-quality resources including technological resources
- counselling services where appropriate
- levels of funding that enable targeted and ongoing attention for students in need
- higher levels of professional development to lift classroom teachers’ expertise.

■ High quality preschool education has significant long terms benefits, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

■ Schools catering for students from low socioeconomic areas need extra resources to lift the achievement of their students.

■ This book is aligned to the Australian Curriculum: English.

Students in these schools need targeted programs in the early years of school that focus on their assessed needs and difficulties. The earlier these programs are implemented the more likely it is that they will be successful—leaving the ‘catch-up programs’ till Year 3 or 4 is often too late to make a difference. These students also need follow-up monitoring and support throughout their school years to ensure that the effects of early intervention programs are maintained.

The Australian Curriculum

The implementation of the Australian Curriculum for English in 2014 aimed to improve the quality, equity and transparency of the school curriculum and provide every student with a world-class education by setting out the knowledge, understanding and skills that are taught. For each year level, the curriculum provides clear statements of what students should be taught (Content descriptions) and what counts as acceptable achievement (Achievement standards). The curriculum’s aims are stated as follows:

[T]he language, literature and literacy strands of the Australian Curriculum: English provide students with the opportunity to:

- understand and use Standard Australian English in its spoken and written forms and in combination with other non-linguistic forms of communication
- develop a sense of the capacity of Standard Australian English to evoke feelings, and to organise and convey information and ideas
- use language to inform, persuade, entertain and argue
- understand, interpret, reflect on and create an increasingly broad repertoire of spoken, written and multimodal texts across a growing range of settings
- develop interest and skill in inquiring into the aesthetic aspects of texts, an informed appreciation of literature, and an understanding of literary criticism, heritage and values
- develop proficiency in the increasingly specialised written and spoken language forms of schooling.

Using this information, teachers can design and implement programs that focus on the needs of their students and the standards that they should be aiming for. Online work samples at each year level on the Australian Curriculum website show teachers what the standards look like for each year level.

■ The Australian curriculum provides detailed information about the teaching of literacy in all subject areas.

As well as the curriculum for English, the Australian curriculum provides information about how to teach literacy as a general capability, that is, as a key component of all learning areas. It shows teachers how to teach students the language and literacy demands of each learning area including, for example, the types of text a subject such as history might use and the specialist vocabulary a subject such as science might require.

Australian state and territory education systems have put in place strategies for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum: English in their jurisdictions. These vary from system to system in the timing and levels of support offered to schools and teachers.

Use the curriculum website link for your state or territory, listed in Useful websites at the end of the book, to access information about its plans and resources for the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

Information about the Australian Curriculum for English and about Literacy as a general capability can be found on the Australian Curriculum website: www.australiancurriculum.edu.au.

Excellence in teaching

Teachers who provide excellence in classroom teaching and learning have detailed knowledge about literacy and how it is learnt, and have strong teaching programs based on accurate assessment of their students. These programs include:

- how to use detailed and continuous assessment to identify students' needs
- knowledge about language, how it works and how it is learnt
- how to structure learning experiences that lead students towards independence in literacy
- how to implement a balanced literacy program that caters for all students
- how to use quality literary, informative and persuasive texts to build reading and writing skills
- how to implement a rich writing program and, importantly
- how to cater for students experiencing literacy difficulties.

This teaching excellence can be achieved through:

- attracting and retaining the best graduates into a career in teaching
- attention to quality literacy teaching in university courses
- provision of ongoing professional development for in-service teachers.

In particular, ongoing professional learning opportunities are essential if teachers are to improve the effectiveness of their teaching, especially for students with difficulties in learning to read and write in ways that are effective for the 21st century.

Research on literacy education in school is an activity carried out in the midst of at least five moving targets:

- changing technologies through which literate communication is used and the reworking of those technologies to re-present the learning and displaying of knowledge.
- changing pathways that young people face as a result of changes in the workplace environment.
- changing patterns of learning, including tensions between academic and vocational balances in the school curriculum.
- changing cultural and linguistic composition of Australian homes and classrooms.
- changing nature of work organisations, including schools. (Freebody 2007)