

Literacy/Literacies

Literacy is commonly understood as the ability to read and write. In the last century, theorists have expanded this definition of literacy. To understand these multiple perspectives of literacy, especially regarding children, the following topics are covered: the history of literacy, literacy as a human right, developments in literacy theories, language variations and bi- and multi-literacies, instruction and assessment, and further readings.

History of Literacy

The emergence of literacy is tied to the first languages, which began as a need to communicate between human beings. Once humans covered the globe, approximately 10,000 languages were in existence. With the birth of writing, many languages diminished. The top 20 languages, which 96% of the world population speaks, are all languages of writing. Numeracy provides some of the first evidence of writing, tracing back to 8000 BCE. Writing systems with token markings were used to support tracking of information for trade, production, and governance. Early examples of written literacy, where only a few “literate” people governed, also demonstrated how literacy originated to support systemic forms of governance for elite management and religion.

Literacy as a Human Right

Historically, literacy has been viewed as a marker of prestige, standing, and success in Western society, though who has access to various kinds of literacy skills often depends on economic, political, social, and educational contexts. As an essential skill for survival and social change, literacy is a human right. The 1996 Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, the 1997 Hamburg Declaration, and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) affirm that literacy is fundamental

to social and human development. Globally, many people still do not have the opportunity to learn to read and write, the majority being women. Illiteracy renders people powerless in today's society, though aliteracy—the dismissal of employing reading skills when one has them—is considered by some to be a growing issue, particularly as technological advances alter forms of communication.

Developments in Literacy Theories

Cognitive, Behavioral, and Constructivist Theories of Literacy

Prior to and for much of the 20th Century, literacy was largely considered a cognitive, autonomous skill learned primarily through disciplining the mind. With the economic turn to train skilled workers in an industrialized society, the factory model of organization and economics constructed a routinized form of education. This behavioral model became entrenched in literacy education practices. Rote forms of literacy instruction developed, with teachers following scripted literacy programs and testing for mastery to condition and reinforce learning. Meanwhile, psychologist Jean Piaget's theory of constructivism—that learning is an organic, active construction of knowledge built from prior knowledge and exploration of the world—began influencing literacy instruction.

Sociocultural Literacy Theories

Emanating from Lev Vygotsky's work in the 1920s that grounded cognitive and constructivist learning in social and cultural contexts, literacy scholars and educators turned their attention to the diverse spaces of student lives: homes, schools, playgrounds, museums, grocery stores, etc. Gaining traction in the 1980s, researchers began providing evidence that literacy acquisition is a social practice that starts in the home and community, not necessarily in schools. Contrasting autonomous notions of literacy, Shirley Brice Heath demonstrated how literacy is a

cultural act that consists of multiple forms of literacy, only some of which are valued in school contexts. Similarly, Brian Street's ideological model of literacy explains that literacy practices are never neutral—that they have a role in upholding power and hegemony—and that they reflect the ideology of the culture they live in. According to James Gee's 1990 theory of Discourses, we use language and various ways of acting, interacting, and speaking to represent membership within a particular community and facilitate movement between Discourse communities. For instance, different Discourses are used when a child begins their morning talking to their family at the breakfast table, and then another when the child talks to a varied age-range of children in the school yard, and then yet another Discourse in the classroom. Key sociocultural theorists espoused this line of thinking about multiple ways of reading the world, using the plural *literacies* rather than the singular *literacy*.

Critical Literacies

In 1968, Paulo Freire theorized a critical pedagogy that suggests a libertarian problem-posing education to develop students' critical consciousness and creative power. In Freire's conscious-raising approach, literacy learning occurs through critical dialogue as a reciprocal and participatory process between students and teachers. Critical literacies highlight the political nature of the literacy field and how literacy can either uphold or repress systems of power.

New Literacies, Multiliteracies, and Multimodality

The promotion of New Literacies Studies (NLS), multiliteracies, and multimodality are endeavors to acknowledge the changing boundaries and relationships of textual environments (i.e. digital, embodied, visual) in cosmopolitan society. Encompassing digital literacies, such as blogging, instant messaging, podcasting, social networking, etc., NLS theorists recognize that globalization and advancements in digital technologies have both altered the tools for literacy

and transformed literacies to be more collaborative and participatory. Multiliteracies was coined by the New London Group, a group of educational researchers who initially met in 1994, who gathered to envision a new literacy theory and pedagogy centered on a global, socially and culturally responsive curriculum with a commitment to social change. Multimodality, informed by social semiotic theory, considers how different modes of representation and communication (e.g., gesture, gaze, image, sound, writing, body posture, music, etc.) intersect, interrelate, and are interpreted and remixed to make up new meanings by the sign maker, or student.

Each of these perspectives grounds literacies as a historically, socially, and culturally situated practice. Literacies are not simply learned in school through specific reading and writing instruction, but instead connect to home, communities, and our global societies. Consequently, literacies may incorporate textual, gestural, visual, spatial, audio, and digital modalities to address the multiple representational practices that teachers and students bring to the classroom. This understanding positions students as designers in their meaning-making processes, accessing different modes of learning and using unique personal and sociocultural funds of knowledge, or skills. Critical theorist Homi Bhaba coined the term thirdspace to integrate both in- and -out-of-school literacies, incorporating the first space knowledges of home and community together with second space knowledges of formal institutions such as schools. These perspectives investigate how power relations, forms of knowledge, and identities aid the dominant construction of literacy practices in schools today.

Embodied/Posthuman Literacies

Recent views of literacy consider how the human mind and body are intertwined and how humans interact not just with other humans, but also with nonhuman entities, such as books, art, digital tools, and institutions. An embodiment perspective considers how bodily postures,

gestures, and actions influence conceptions of literate beings and activity; how bodies are fashioned and viewed as texts; how emotion and affect are inextricable from engaging in literacy experiences; and how the ever-changing notion of the body makes an understanding of literacy activities constantly in flux. Posthuman views of literacies decenter the role of the mind, regrounding literacies within the entire body, as well as the human body within its social and material environment, recognizing how literacies are both a product of and an influence on the world around us.

Language Variations and Bi & Multilingual Literacies

Multiple languages and language variations surround children in their homes, communities, and schools. Utilizing students' home literacies and languages in school as a learning and teaching tool creates access and accelerates both content area and basic literacy skills, supporting cognitive development and academic achievement. The notion of dynamic bilingualism, intermingling of past and present language practice, or the multi-competence of holding two languages at the same time, promotes understanding of the complexity of literacies in an increasingly multilingual global village. Translanguaging, which includes code-switching from one language to another, is reading, writing, listening and/or speaking in one language and using another language to, for example, take notes, discuss, or write.

Instruction & Assessment

Stages of Literacy Learning

Several theorists have proposed that children develop literacy skills through stages. Such theorists agree that a pre-literate or emerging stage occurs before formal literacy instruction, in which the focus is on basic concepts of reading and writing. For example, that spoken language is comprised of distinguishable sounds and sound segments that are in turn represented by print,

that print moves in a certain direction depending on linguistic and sociocultural norms, and so on. Children then progress to a stage, usually along with formal instruction, in which decoding print into sound and encoding sound into print is the focus and goal. Then instruction concentrates on comprehension, vocabulary, and composition skills, becoming more complex and expansive throughout the grades. Critics argue that a developmental approach to literacy instruction can limit learning to isolated skills, an approach that does not reflect how people experience language and literacy in reality.

Instruction

Common consensus among experts is that literacies instruction is best approached through a comprehensive approach balancing skills-based and whole language experiences; teacher-led instruction with student-centered learning; whole-class, small group, and one-to-one instruction; and direct instruction with independent practice time. The comprehensive balanced literacies approach includes the phonics approach, teaching isolated sound-letter skills, and the whole language approach, emphasizing meaning and expression. Most balanced literacies programs involve (1) word study, in which the focus is on phonics, vocabulary, and spelling; (2) read-alouds, in which the teacher models reading strategies, thinking, and behaviors they want to teach while reading aloud or analyzing a shared text to the whole class, (3) shared reading/interactive writing, in which teacher and students read or compose a text collaboratively, (4) guided reading/writing, in which the teacher tailors instruction for a small group of students who have similar strengths and needs, and (5) independent reading/writing, in which students practice the skills and strategies they are learning, typically in a workshop format. Listening and speaking skills, such as storytelling and debate, are often woven throughout these structures, and reading and writing can be extended to other modes of text analysis and composing, such as

reading a visual image. The use of children's literature and trade books provides students with authentic literacy experiences. Additionally, balanced literacies instruction follows a gradual release of responsibility from teacher-directed instruction to guided practice and eventually to independent practice.

Assessment

Informal literacies assessments, such as observations of student activities and discussions and teacher-student conferences, occur regularly to gather information about students' daily literacies work. Formal literacies assessments, such as written assignments, oral reports, tests, presentations, portfolios, and multimodal performances and presentations, are official data representing student learning. A number of assessments are diagnostic, particularly those that assess emergent and early literacy skills, such as fluency, spelling, and decoding, to target specific cognitive skills. Teachers commonly assess reading levels to determine what kinds of texts are easy, difficult, or "on level" for student instruction. As with literacies instruction, a balanced approach to assessment is most effective.

Literacies learning is also gauged through formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments, administered sometimes at the beginning or middle of a unit of study, focus on the progression of learning while students are still *forming* their understanding, allowing teachers to use the assessment results to immediately adjust their instruction to achieve the learning goals. Summative assessments are administered at the end of a unit of study to evaluate students' mastery of the skills that were taught, particularly in relation to content standards. Both kinds of assessments collect data about student literacies learning and can be used to revise instructional goals and programs.

The rise of standardized testing has played a significant role in literacies instruction and assessment. Standardized tests reduce literacies to the traditional notions of reading and writing, thereby limiting the accuracy of resulting data about students' literacies abilities. Score results are frequently used for high-stakes decisions about school funding, teacher employment, and student graduation. Standardized testing has impacted daily literacies instruction in such ways as reducing instructional time in favor of test preparation and administration tasks, scripting and mandating curricula and materials, and emphasizing low-level skills that are easier to assess through standardized means over high-level skills that benefit students both inside and outside the classroom.

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See also Critical Pedagogy; Digital Literacy; Language, Social and Cultural Aspects; Literature for Children; Young Adult (YA) Literature

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