

Digital Literacy and Blindness: Towards a Theory of Listening as Literacy
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Abstract

Literacy, in its dominant form of print or digital alphabetic text demands visual engagement, ignoring and negating other senses. This visual hegemony constrains the production and dissemination of texts and tools that are usable for people who are blind or low vision. Further, braille is considered by many to be the only legitimate form of literacy for people who are blind. This focus on braille, in combination with the visual hegemony of print, negates the audio-based literacy practices used by many people who are blind or low vision. This study explores the literacy practices of adults who are blind or low vision, with particular focus on how study participants use sound to read, write, and understand visual culture. Study participants revealed literacy practices that are diverse, multimodal, and constrained by assumptions about how literacy should be practiced.

Summary

The study employs a collective case study approach with interviewing and observation as its primary methods. Twenty-eight adults (ages 20-68) who are blind or low vision were interviewed for 30-90 minutes; interviews emphasized participants' literacy life histories and daily literacy activities. Three individuals participated in follow-up interviews and observations, which focused on literacy activities related to specific assistive technologies.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The study's intent was primarily exploratory and attempted to better understand the literacy practices of people who are blind and low vision in a culture of literacy that is predominantly visual. The study's interviews and observations suggest multiple directions for future research:

- How does disability redefine what reading and writing mean?
- How do texts that support modal flexibility (i.e., the same information conveyed through multiple sensory channels) impact delivery and retention of content?
- How can current technologies such as auditory display and sonification help to translate the visual material of literacy and support sound-based literacy?