

Literacy/Literacies

Definition

Historically, literacy has been thought of as the ability to read, but a fuller definition of literacy includes writing as well. Perhaps the fullest definition of literacy is that provided by the National Council of Teachers of English in their definition of twenty-first century literacies:

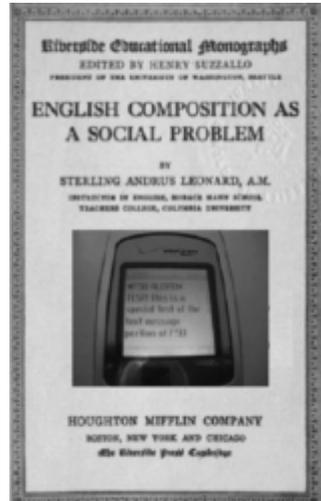
Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the twenty-first century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies—from reading online newspapers to participating in virtual classrooms—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. Twenty-first century readers and writers need to

- Develop proficiency with the tools of technology
- Build relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and cross-culturally
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multi-media texts
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments



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Importance to the Field

As the definition above suggests, proficiency in literacies has historically provided for “life possibilities” for individuals. Such proficiency has also supported individual and collective efforts on behalf of social justice. As scholars of literacy have demonstrated, such proficiency does not guarantee success or happiness, but without it our individual and collective humanity is diminished.

Resources

- Barton, David, and Mary Hamilton. *Local Literacies: Reading and Writing in One Community*. New York: Routledge, 1998. Print.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. Print.
- Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth. *Academic Literacies: The Public and Private Discourse of University Students*. Portsmouth: Heinemann-Boynton/Cook, 1991. Print.
- Lunsford, Andrea A., Helene Moglen, and James Slevin, eds. *The Right to Literacy*. New York: MLA, 1990. Print.
- National Council of Teachers of English. “The NCTE Definition of 21st Century Literacies.” NCTE, 15 Feb. 2008. Web. 18 Aug. 2010.