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Literacy or Literacies?

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What is literacy?

To many in education, if not more widely, the definition of this term is changing and now tends to be understood as more than reading and writing, increasingly including other forms of communication:

What is literacy? Is it just about reading and writing or is it about how we respond to and understand our world? ICT, with its new forms of text and its multimodal possibilities for narrative, has made us re-assess what literacy means. ICT is opening many minds to the educational value of not only visual but also audio-visual literacy, whilst our curriculum remains rooted in a notion of literacy that is over 400 years old, as old as the printed books of the sixteenth century.

Tony Archdeacon: <http://www.learntolive.org.uk/index.php>

But how legitimate is it to talk about scientific literacy, health literacy, visual literacy, digital literacy, emotional literacy etc?

Back to basics: what is the function of literacy?

Discussions of literacy are often confused because its role in the development of language and thought is not understood. Some may think that this is assumed or taken for granted, but the more one reads into discussions about the 'new literacies' the more it is clear that this link has been largely lost or obscured. So when we discuss 'what is literacy?' this connection needs to be remade.

- We live in a literate society: our level of culture has been built on the basis of written/printed language – and a wide access to it. Through the process of reading and writing, language and concepts are evolved. By writing them down, ideas are kept alive and can be systematically developed in a way no oral, or visual, communication can achieve. Printing technologies have made information and ideas accessible and debatable among not just a tiny elite, but to masses of people.
- In the process of language development children learn to separate the word from the object: they learn that 'table' for example is not just a specific concrete thing, but as a category of things that you eat off or draw on. In order to be able to read children have to understand at some level that language signifies objects – it is not the same as objects – this is one of the reasons why early language development is so important. However, the process of becoming literate helps children become more highly conscious of language as representing thought and ideas which don't necessarily have a concrete visible existence. Margaret Donaldson:

The process of becoming literate can have marked – but commonly unsuspected – effects on the growth of the mind. It can do this by encouraging highly important forms of intellectual self-awareness and self-control. ... [it can] greatly enhance the child's reflective awareness, not only of language as a symbolic system but of the processes of his own mind.

The distancing process of reading and writing establishes the possibility that you can manipulate and control your own thought processes. If you think about the effect of writing, for example, on your own thinking and how it helps you to clarify and direct your thought processes – what you need to think about and research, what new concepts you need to grasp, to clarify a question or confusion, for example, – you can see how the process of reading and writing may play a unique role in the process of thought and language development.

Old hat vs new realities

However, in this post-modern, multimedia, multi-sensory world, is the traditional notion of literacy still adequate to our needs? Reading and writing – printed/written text – is obviously only one way of communicating information and ideas – a form that, some argue, privileges particular modes of thought. Other modes of communication – oral, visual, electronic multimedia – offer alternatives for people who find reading and writing difficult, or for ideas that can be better expressed in other forms. Decoding and analysing printed texts is just one skill among many that we need to communicate: we also need to be able to analyse a wide range of texts in a variety of media and to use the internet effectively.

There has been a burgeoning of 'literacies', and the discussion of literacy can get quite confusing. Advocates of a skill may use the term 'literacy' as a tag to give it a kind of legitimacy in an educational context. This tag is used to identify skills to be taught in a formal context – skills that once might have been acquired through social interaction and informal processes. 'Emotional literacy' – that is the ability to identify, communicate and respond to emotions – is no longer a social skill that you can be expected to acquire in the course of a variety of social experiences as you grow up. Likewise, the ability to play, talk about and analyse games was once something kids might pick up in the course of game play and exchanging game play experiences. Recently 'game literacy' has been added to the list of literacies with the implication it should become a goal of formal education.

Adding 'literacy' implies an entitlement that might otherwise be hard to argue for. It also implies that schools are responsible for helping children to develop these skills. Putting emotional literacy on the curriculum is supposed to ensure that no child leaves school without it. The problem with this way of understanding literacy is that it reduces it to a collection of mundane formulaic skills, which gives you access to certain codes and conventions, but doesn't necessarily have any kind of **transformative power**. Thus 'emotional literacy'

becomes a matter of recognising certain signs and expressions or posing things in certain ways. This concept is barren compared the 'old-fashioned' aspiration of getting kids to read literature because, among other things, it helps develop their abilities to empathise with others.

There seems to be a tendency to fragment the concept of literacy into a range of more narrowly defined skills that don't necessarily amount to the whole. With computer literacy, digital literacy, information literacy – literacy becomes a kind of information processing skill not an expressive language skill and a tool to facilitate and develop thinking.

The essential function of literacy is to make it possible for individuals to engage as fully as possible with the knowledge and culture of society – and ideally to play a role in developing and creating new culture. In this sense literacy is relative to social development. It can't be reduced to a basic skill, but involves a rich process of engagement with the texts and what they represent. Educationists are responsible for ensuring that their students develop their ability to engage with texts at a number of levels, and in the cultural context in which we live. It is legitimate for educators to point to the variety of skills that children need in interpreting and interacting with the range of sources of information and cultural and communicative forms in the modern electronic world. It is important to recognise that some skills are more difficult to impart and acquire than others, and thus should take priority in the context of formal education. Reading, for example, is more difficult than watching and interpreting a film. Some skills do need to be more systematically taught and developed than others. However, basic skills are only the starting point for a much deeper education to enable young people to engage with modern society – they can't be the main objective of the educational process.

Media literacy – taking things further?

I work in the field of media education and have been grappling with the issue of media literacy. In the current discussion about media literacy there is no agreed understanding of the term, beyond a broad definition offered by Ofcom:

Media literacy is the ability to access, understand and create communications in a variety of contexts.

This definition is not particularly distinctive. A media literate person – one could say – is an educated, literate person, someone able to take advantage of the range of opportunities offered by the modern technologically advanced world, enjoying what they like and avoiding what they find offensive.

To what extent should media literacy become an explicit element of literacy in a world where new media seems to play an increasingly important role in the communication process? There are rich possibilities in the study of moving image media texts and particular skills and

knowledge involved in interpreting and appreciating them. As with books, not all are equally worthwhile, but there are specific decoding, analytical and expressive skills – understanding and using different ‘languages and grammars’ – which enable you to think and talk more coherently about films and television, which can enhance your enjoyment and your critical consideration of them. There are many elements of film that have much in common with literary texts – narrative, plot, character, symbolism and imagery etc. Films (and much of television) rely heavily on strong inference skills – and can help to develop these. Referring back to my earlier discussion of literacy as being about the development of language and mental skills – watching and talking about films can play a role in this process. There is some evidence that the development of young children’s reading comprehension is enhanced by their ability to talk about film narratives.

So ... to conclude: I would resist the idea of literacy becoming a fragmented string of skills or a totally elastic concept that can be tagged onto a skill to justify its inclusion within the school curriculum. This destroys the essential core of literacy which is about developing language and thinking and about developing culture and society. Literacy, at bottom line, has to be about being able to read and write because of the access this gives us to the world of knowledge and culture. But it is more about people engaging with this knowledge and culture than it is about a string of measurable skills or competencies.