Literacy

RENEE HOBBS
University of Rhode Island, USA

Although literacy is commonly understood as the ability to read and write, definitions of literacy generally include the ability to use culturally available symbol systems for comprehending, composing and sharing ideas, experiences, knowledge, and meanings. As a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of a particular group, literacy includes the ability to decode text, to participate in meaning-making by interpreting and composing, to use texts functionally and appreciate their particular forms, structures, and purposes, and to analyze texts critically, recognizing how they represent the world in selective and incomplete ways. In this formulation, texts are understood to be symbolic representations in any of a number of forms, including spoken and printed language, still and moving images, sound and multimedia.

The term literacy is expanding, used once only to refer to reading, and then gradually incorporating the practices of writing, speaking, and listening during the first half of the 20th century. In the second half of the 20th century, with the rise of film, television, mass media, and the Internet, critical viewing of images, audiovisual and digital media has been conceptualized as literacy practices. Responsive to changes in technology and changes in society, "literacy has always been at the center of the educational enterprise" (Berlin, 1987, p. 1).

Theories of literacy connect philosophical ideas about the role of symbols in society with practical concerns about learning and teaching, as literacy is considered fundamental to learning and cultural participation. Interdisciplinary and comparative studies of education have shaped the theory and philosophy of literacy for more than 80 years. Theories of literacy reflect perspectives of scholars and thinkers in a variety of disciplines, including history, education, literature, psychology, philosophy, and communication. Research methodologies, ideological perspectives, and hands-on work with learners have also shaped theoretical formulations of literacy.

Today, the concept of literacy is inseparable from *the practice of inquiry*, the practice of asking questions about what we see, watch, read, and listen to. Literacy is generally less likely to be described as a set of skills and more likely to be described as a set of meaning-making practices for getting things done in the world, with a focus on the personal and collective questions of learners. Such literacy practices involve learners in interrogating their values, moving through a process of accessing, analyzing, creating, reflexivity, and action.

Theories of literacy are aligned with changes in communications media and are responsive to cultural anxieties about technological change in general. Public fears about the loss of literacy competencies and the resulting decline of interest in cultural

heritage are common in Western societies. Many critics and commentators articulate fears that the rise of the Internet and digital media are destroying literacy. Carr (2010) argues that phones and computers are rewiring neural structures in ways that influence attention, reading, creative and critical thinking competencies. Critics note that such fears are often rooted in nostalgia for the past and selective reading of evidence (Graff, 2010). Others are more optimistic, acknowledging that the Internet is ushering in a new, vibrant participatory culture where young people are doing more reading and writing than in previous eras as literacy practices are increasingly social and multimodal, involving the sharing of images, language, sound, and multimedia (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2006). In the early part of the 21st century, as mass media, popular culture, and computing technologies have become normative in homes, schools, and workplaces, the responsible use of media has been conceptualized as a dimension of *digital literacy* (Hobbs, 2010). An examination of literacy theory and research in the 21st century suggests we are moving to integrate the paradigm of print literacy with the new paradigm of visual and digital literacy.

Historiography of literacy

Throughout the Enlightenment, literacy was taken for granted among the elite. During this time period, literacy was defined primarily as *oral reading*, which included learning how to recognize words, sentences, and elements of design in printed texts, including prose, exposition, drama, and poetry. Silent reading did not emerge as a focus of instruction until the 20th century. The *alphabet method* of reading was used during the 17th century with specialized primers or spelling books. By the 1830s, approaches to reading were influenced by Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a pedagogical reformer whose reform of schools led to the elimination of illiteracy among the Swiss population. Influenced by Rousseau, Pestalozzi's view of literacy was embodied in the concept of the learner as a fully integrated human being who learned best "by head, hands, and heart." Reading was taught by emphasizing prereading activities with emphasis on the teaching of whole words. Emphasis was on the acquisition of words through repeated exposure; learners recognized words by associating sight and sound, which is sometimes called *sight reading*. In the 20th century, the progressive movement in education, which is associated with the work of John Dewey, viewed literacy in the context of the learner's natural interests and activities. With its focus on pleasure and choice, literacy education encouraged children as young as 10 to read excerpts from Charles Dickens, Walter Scott, Hans Christian Andersen, and other popular authors.

The scientific study of reading emerged at Columbia University Teachers College and at other institutions in the fields of psychology, history, and education where the rise of mass schooling associated with large-scale immigration contributed to the demand for elementary, secondary, and college teachers. During the early part of the 20th century, teachers of English separated from the scholars who dominated the Modern Language Association (MLA) to form their own professional association, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1911.

Theories of human development, influenced by Jean Piaget, emphasized that reading required particular levels of maturation and human development and should occur only after a child reaches the age of six. Behaviorism informed literacy theories of the progressive era, as teacher-centered direct instruction dominated the pedagogy of reading instruction. Reading scholarship became a field of study by the 1930s, with the publication of numerous books addressed to teachers of reading and the prevention and correction of reading difficulties.

Among this knowledge community, reading instruction theories diverged between those that focused on decoding and those that emphasized comprehension. In secondary education, theories of literacy education included attention to *critical analysis* as learners were encouraged to engage in active questioning of texts, assessing the quality of argument and soundness of evidence. There was a focus on literary appreciation involving the examination of the *rhetorical devices* of classical rhetoric used by communicators to achieve particular emotional effects. Literacy education in the early part of the 20th century also included attention to the use of library tools to *find and access information* from print sources.

In the 1930s, the rise of interest in mass communication became embedded in literacy practices, especially in secondary and higher education. Inspired by the rise of anti-Semitism, English teachers began teaching students how to recognize and resist propaganda. Attention to forms of mass communication have been understood as a key dimension of literacy since the 1940s when Edgar Dale's *How to Read a Newspaper* was published for high school students. In 1952, when the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) laid out a comprehensive approach to literacy and language arts education, they recommended specific strategies to guide the reading of documentary, informational and entertainment film. They also offered guidelines for teaching about newspapers, magazines, television, and radio, including helping students to understand these media as forms of art with distinctive commercial structures and with differing forms of government regulation. In 1956, the International Reading Association was formed by the merger of two smaller professional organizations that focused on the remediation of learners with reading difficulties.

By the 1960s, disciplinary specialization in the university flourished and theories of literacy benefited from the work of historians, sociologists, and anthropologists. Historians developed an interest in tracking the literacy levels of people in various countries during the Industrial Revolution. They defined literacy as the ability to decode and comprehend written language at a rudimentary level. If someone could look at written words corresponding to ordinary oral discourse, say them, and understand them, this signaled that a person was literate. Lacking other measures of literacy, scholars considered the ability to sign one's name to a legal document as a proxy measure of literacy. To understand literacy in historical context, scholars also examined the socioeconomic framework for the history of the book, paying particular attention to popular reading interests. Other scholars have examined the history of audiences, using diaries, autobiographies, and letters to understand the meaning of literacy practices in the context of daily life.

Literacy educators also developed theoretical and pedagogical strategies for addressing the widespread skepticism about veracity and authenticity of public discourse in

the worlds of politics, the military, and business. In 1970, the National Council for the Teachers of English passed a resolution to study dishonest uses of language by advertisers, proposing the use of classroom techniques for preparing children to cope with commercial propaganda. Later, they also examined the relationship between language and public policy, to address the lies of public officials, candidates for office, and political commentators in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

The teaching of listening and speaking has been understood as essential to the practice of literacy education since the early part of the 20th century. However, speech education developed independently from literacy education after the Speech Communication Association (now the National Communication Association) separated from the National Council of Teachers of English in 1912. As a result, the term literacy is not typically associated with speech or oral communication. By the 1940s, writing was beginning to receive more emphasis in public schools; learning to write gradually became a key literacy practice taught in formal education. At the college level, some English teachers began to specialize in the teaching of writing so that, by 1949, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) attracted teachers of writing at the college level, and graduate programs in writing and composition gradually developed distinctive theoretical paradigms. By the 1950s, the teaching of writing composition at the college level became a special course often required of American college graduates.

Literacy controversies

Theories of *emergent literacy* posit that children's listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills begin at birth. Progressive educational approaches emphasize that literacy emerges naturally from a language-rich environment where learners have the ability to make choices over their reading and where connections between home literacy practices and academic literacy practices are made explicit. This approach is often called the *whole language* approach to literacy education.

In contrast, *stage theories of reading* came to include a focus on phonics instruction, where learners are explicitly taught about the correspondence between letters and sounds. Reading development was theoretically conceptualized as including phonology (awareness of the sounds of speech), orthography (knowledge of spelling patterns), semantics (word meaning), grammar, and syntax, and morphology (patterns of word formation). To accommodate this approach to literacy education, printed matter was evaluated by examining the frequency of familiar words, and textbooks were specially created for children to move through a series of levels in learning to decode print. Today, the *lexile* framework is used to determine what reading materials are appropriate to developing readers, and educators are encouraged to value the *text complexity* of works in promoting reading skills.

Empirical studies of reading in the 1960s were influenced by theories of cognitive development, where literacy was conceptualized as an interrelated series of cognitive processes and skills. The term *functional literacy* came to describe a level of schooling deemed sufficient to insure the ability to read everyday symbols, including visual logos,

newspapers and bus schedules. The term *language arts* is used to describe both *receptive* literacies (listening, reading, viewing) and *productive* literacies (speaking, writing, creating media) needed to be successful in the world outside the classroom. In American public education, these approaches to literacy education became controversial when teaching reading became part of the public debate in the United States with popular books like *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

Stage theories of literacy and whole language approaches began to collide again in the 1990s with the rise of activist groups seeking to advance phonics education in public schools; these groups were eager to blame student failure on inattention to phonics. As processes of decoding are mastered, learners also develop the ability to make inferences, predict, and comprehend. By the 1990s, literacy education also included explicit instruction in staged reading comprehension strategies, including self-monitoring, asking questions, and summarizing. Critics of the whole language approach to literacy were politically active, and eventually persuaded Congress to establish a National Reading Panel to evaluate existing research and evidence on the best ways to teach reading. This controversial research review found that a combination of teaching methods, called *balanced literacy*, is most effective. The panel found that learners need phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, guided oral reading, vocabulary instruction, and reading comprehension strategies. But the report was highly controversial because it disregarded much important research that did not fit narrow empirical criteria (Larson, 2007). Critics noted that the NRP's approach reflected a reductionist approach based on the philosophy of verificationism. As Cunningham explains, the National Reading Panel focused on "claims of effectiveness" for political expediency rather than tackling the challenge of assessing actual effectiveness, reflecting a belief that the meaning of statements is more important than the nature of reality (Cunningham, 2001).

Literacy theories and research continued to become polarized into the 1990s in the context of teacher education, as approaches to teaching decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and reading instruction in the classroom came to be studied through both the use of social-scientific research methodologies and ethnographic, narrative, and qualitative research methods. During this time, many members of the reading research community were beginning to become frustrated with narrow definitions of literacy focused on decoding and phonemic awareness. Many recognized the need to explore literacy education practices more broadly, viewing reading as but one aspect of how teachers and students communicate in classrooms. Even those who study reading comprehension specifically recontextualized reading in relation to online practices that involve keyword search, selecting text, skimming and scanning for informational content (Coiro & Dobler, 2007). Leading scholars of reading now recognize the need to expand reading and writing to include reading as part of a much broader dimension of communication.

Literacy, orality, and meaning

Theories of literacy have emerged from historical analyses of *symbol systems in the context of social structures*. Technological developments in communication transformed social organization and enabled the centralization or decentralization of social power.

For example, writing helped transform Greek city-states into the Alexandrian empire, as researchers explored how the artistic and political achievements of preliterate Greece were products of an oral society, noting that we should not equate cultural sophistication with print literacy (McLuhan, 1964/1994).

Using an eclectic approach to historical analysis, Harold A. Innis showed that sudden extensions of communication are reflected in cultural shifts, as in the time-biased media of heavy clay tablets, which favored local government and literacy practices limited to a special class, while space-biased media like papyrus or paper favored empire, innovation, and the expansion of literacy in ways that created mass publics. Although some scholars viewed the introduction of writing as contributing to a shift from cultural tradition towards modernity, this theoretical idea was undercut with evidence from anthropologists and historians. However, the technological features of writing do have particular social and political effects on culture: Writing allows the replication and spread of ideas, the preservation of messages, and promotes a focus on sequence, word choice, and the construction of lists, tables, recipes, and indexes. By separating the message from the author, writing decontextualizes language. Writing supports bureaucracy, accounting, and legal systems with universal rules, replacing face-to-face governance with depersonalized administration. Print literacy spread the value of vernacular languages and promoted fragmentation in religious doctrine. Literacy also valorized the individual author and contributed to Enlightenment values of independence and autonomy over earlier tribal values of social connectedness and participation (McLuhan, 1964/1994).

Theories of literacy have also been influenced by the work of literary critics and philosophers who have explored *expressivist approaches to meaning*. Ogden and Richards (1923/1989) invited literacy educators to consider the role of interpretation in the reading process. The current definition of literacy represents a profound shift from the earlier text-driven definition of literacy to a view of literacy as active engagement with and transformation of texts (Hiebert, 1991). While once meaning was considered a property of a text, today it is understood that literacy is the sharing of meaning through symbols. Meaning is created through an interaction of reader and text as writers construct texts and readers construct meaning. Today most scholars recognize that literacy is a culturally situated practice that mediates human development such that thinking reflects social practices while in turn helping to shape them.

Theories of literacy and culture competence

Literacy is a form of social power and, as such, for thousands of years it was restricted to the powerful. It wasn't until the 19th century that political elites began to recognize the value of literacy as a social value for all citizens. Theories of literacy are imbued with values as scholars have considered the generally positive implications of literacy on individuals and for society. Literacy's presumed beneficial effects contributed to the belief that schooling should become mandated for all, although in general it was upper-class white males in urban settings who benefited from being literate (Caestle, 1988).

Addressing the idea that literacy is a form of social power, the theory of *cultural literacy* was best expressed by E. D. Hirsch (1987, p. 16), who noted, that "to be truly literate, a person must be conversant with a specific body of knowledge known to educated people, or, more precisely, the cultural knowledge of the dominant society." Such knowledge is presumed to have positive benefits for individuals. This theory is widely expounded by political elites around the world, as when the deputy secretary of UNESCO proclaimed, "Literacy remains part of the unfinished business of the 20th century. One of the success stories of the 21st century must be the extension of literacy to include all humankind." Literacy, especially for women in developing nations, is associated with increases in health, economic development and social mobility (quoted in Graff, 2010, p. 72).

But the belief that literacy has had a universally positive social impact has been challenged by some scholars who note the paucity of evidence to demonstrate the value of literacy on poor and marginalized people. In the eyes of scholars like Gerald Graff, the *literacy myth* has distorted people's understanding of the genuine benefits of literacy by claiming more benefits that can be actually substantiated. Although literate communities have been conceptualized as superior to oral societies and literacy is generally considered better than illiteracy, scholars have problematized this idea, finding that the uses of literacy are contextual and situational and vary considerably across cultures. Literacy's impact is not universal, independent, and determinative. Instead, its "importance and influences depend on specific social and historical contexts, which, in effect, give literacy its meanings … literacy's impacts are mediated and restricted … its effects are social and particular … literacy must be understood as one among a number of communication media and technologies" (Graff, 2010, p. 645).

Literacy in sociocultural context

When psychologists, historians and literary critics began looking at cultural differences between oral and literate societies, Lev Vygotsky's studies of illiterate Russian peasants had an important influence on the field of education. His landmark work, *Mind in Society*, was a treatise on the relationship between concept formation, abstract thinking, human development, and language. Vygotsky (1978) noted that writing transforms speech in ways that promote detachment from the actual situation. Although suppressed by Stalin during his lifetime, Vygotsky's work became highly influential among scholars of education in the 1970s when it was finally translated into English. By situating literacy practices within a sociocultural framework, literacy theories emerged to more fully acknowledge the role of social identity, agency, and social structure in the practice of literacy.

Building on this theoretical foundation, one important study aimed to identify the psychological consequences of literacy, and in particular to distinguish between the effects of literacy and those of schooling. Cole and Scribner (1974) studied reading among the Vai tribe of Liberia, a small minority group prominent in commerce. This work emphasized a theoretical framing of *literacy as subordinated to particular contexts and practices of daily life*; moreover, this study established that

literacy's impact cannot be generalized independently from the consequences of schooling.

The rise of cultural studies scholarship in the 1980s led to an examination of the literacy practices of poor and working-class people, revealing that everyday reading and writing practices are considerably different from the literacy practices developed in school. Literacy is deeply implicated in cultural materialism, where continually widening audiences for culture mandate an increasing variety of mediated and commercial forms. Building on the work of cultural studies scholarship, literacy educators increasingly began to recognize the value of informal learning in out-of-school contexts and the importance of situating literacy practices within sociocultural contexts. Research has shown the active meaning-making processes at work in everyday literacy practices of poor people in urban communities. Literacy practices in daily life are understood to have a variety of functions, including social interaction and instrumental uses where literacy is needed to navigate issues of practical daily life (reading price tags and traffic signs). In school, literacy practices may include a focus on critical and aesthetic appreciation or informational or recreational purposes. The term *family literacy* is used to describe a series of ideas about how the design, implementation of evaluation of programs to facilitate literacy development must include active roles for family members, sensitivity to everyday literacy practices in the home, and examination of the relationship between family behaviors and student achievement.

Literacy as a means of social transformation

Although literacy and education may support democratic discourse, literacy has also been used to foster political repression, support racism, and maintain inequitable social conditions. Stuckey (1990, p. 64) even claims, "Literacy is a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups within given populations and against individual people." In working with poor Brazilians, where literacy was a requirement to vote in elections, Paolo Freire (1970/2000) offered an articulation of *critical literacy* based on the concept of *conscientization*, which he defines as the combination of reflection and action in order to transform society. Freire encouraged adult illiterates to participate in a process of critical reflection on the social conditions in which they found themselves, replacing lectures with dialogue, using pictures to promote vocabulary development through cultural analysis, and finally the learning of syllabic combinations of certain generative words, drawn from themes relevant to the political problems, issues, struggles, and conflicts of national, regional, and local life.

A key theoretical formulation of literacy is that it is not politically neutral: Literacy can be used to maintain the social status quo or challenge injustice and inequity. Educators who practice critical literacy work in opposition to the transmission model of education, where students are turned into containers to be filled with static knowledge. Instead, they create experiences that offer students opportunities to actively construct knowledge. Freire encouraged educators to work with learners to interrogate social conditions through dialogue about issues significant to their lives. Typically, critical

literacy pedagogy invites students to question disparities including socioeconomic status, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Reading is conceptualized as a form of critique designed to recognize and resist privileged forms of social power. When students become critically literate, they can examine their position and the part they play in the world. Theorists of critical literacy invite learners to examine and work to reform social situations by identifying the biases and hidden agendas within texts. In this sense, they are encouraged to see how traditional formulations of literacy reflect "the structures of authority that govern schools and their societies" (Graff, 2010, p. 645).

Multiliteracies

Most literacy scholars recognize that literacy is no longer confined to the domain of printed language. New forms of expression and communication are displacing the primacy of print language (Kress, 2003). The rise of interest in multiple literacies has emerged from a need to better respond to globalization and citizenship in contemporary society. Because social media tools and platforms have enabled group collaboration and community dialogue, audiences have become producers, and the gap between productive literacies and receptive literacies has narrowed. Text, images, graphics, and other design elements are considered *modes*, or culturally shaped resources for meaning-making, that may activate linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal patterns of meaning. These modes are dynamic and interconnected; the combination of modes may create new meanings (Gee, 2003).

The history of writing instruction in the 20th century shows the important connections between visual production and alphabetic reading and writing, as writing teachers used the instructional strategy of producing media to encourage critical analysis, promote creativity and invention, consider the relationship between image and word, and destabilize concepts of linearity and originality through the application of concepts like assemblage and remix (Palmieri, 2012).

As the definition of literacy has expanded to accommodate the variety of forms of expression and communication that are part of contemporary culture, a variety of interrelated terms emerged. Terms like *visual literacy*, *information literacy*, *media literacy*, *computer literacy*, *transliteracy*, *multiliteracies*, and *news literacy* are used to capture the wider range of competencies and skills needed to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages using a variety of texts, genres, tools, and technologies. Similarly, terms like *author*, *audience*, *context*, and *text* have also expanded from their earlier formulation focused on writers and writing towards the inclusion of forms of expression and communication that include visual, audiovisual, sound, interactive, and digital formats and modes. The term *digital literacy* is beginning to be used to represent the technical, cognitive, and social competencies, knowledge, and skills needed to communicate effectively and participate in the contemporary knowledge economy. Similarly, in 2012, the American Library Association defined digital literacy as the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, understand, evaluate, create, and communicate digital information. Basic reading and writing skills are foundational; and true digital literacy requires both cognitive and technical skill.

The European Commission has invested millions of euros in supporting European nations to develop the media and information literacy competencies of its citizens, reflecting an increasingly global awareness of the need to empower citizens by providing them with the competencies necessary to engage with traditional media and new technologies. Key elements include understanding the role and functions of media in democratic societies; understanding the conditions under which media can fulfill their functions; critically evaluating media content; engaging with media for self-expression and democratic participation; and developing skills needed to produce user-generated content. Access to quality media and information content and participation in media and communication networks are necessary to realize Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights regarding the right to freedom of opinion and expression.

Although "print-based text is in no way endangered, it now interacts with digital technologies and multimodality to create more complex texts" (Carrington & Robinson, 2009, p. 3) and learners' engagement with these materials can be explored through an examination of the *interpretive communities* and *affinity groups* which develop as those who have similar interests learn from each other with digital texts, tools, and technologies. Literacy practices are embedded in the contexts of sharing among knowledge communities, where literacy strategies and informational content are seen as mutually supportive and inextricably linked. Theories of literacy also explore *practices of creative collaboration*, inspired by Vygotsky's work on apprenticeship, to understand the process of intellectual interdependence as learners do not merely absorb messages in the cultural environment, but actively coconstruct them. Thus, literacy practices are shifting from a focus on individual behavior to a focus on collaborative, social activity where the widespread availability and circulation of texts creates opportunities for many different forms of shared cultural participation and yet also demands increased levels of intellectual curiosity, critical analysis, and creative expression (Harste, 2001).

SEE ALSO: Critical Theory; Education; Innis, Harold A.; McLuhan, Marshall; Orality; Pragmatics; Psychology; Semantics; Semiotics; Text

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Renee Hobbs is professor of communication studies and director of the Media Education Lab at the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island. She is the founding coeditor of the *Journal of Media Literacy Education* (jmle.org), the official publication of the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE). She has research interests in digital and media literacy education in primary and secondary education and copyright and fair use for digital learning.