



▶ ADULT LITERACY RESEARCH

Literacy in the new millennium

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▶ **THE WORLD HAS** changed profoundly over the last 50 years, and many of our longstanding assumptions about literacy and language need to be challenged. Thus, literacy has no single or universal definition, and it is often defined in contradictory ways. Some definitions focus on the skills needed by individuals for work, education, social interaction and the negotiation of everyday living. Others have a more social focus, such as the notion of it contributing knowledge to the creation of an empowered community. How it is defined shapes the kinds of policies developed and the teaching/learning practices adopted by the educational sector.

The meaning of literacy has changed over time from an elementary 'decoding' of words to a range of more complex and diverse skills and understandings. Changing conceptions of literacy need to be understood against a background of economic, social, political and cultural change. Recent theorists see literacy as a 'social practice' which should be considered in context, rather than the convention of literacy as an individual, cognitive skill.

Literacy can be described as a form of human capital, an essential functional skill for individual employment and economic sufficiency. A contrasting idea is that of literacy as 'enabling' and empowering individuals for critical reflection, rather than simply accepting existing social beliefs and institutions.

Social and economic change requires new literacies beyond print, but the boundaries are indistinct. Computing knowledge, and social comprehension skills, may be regarded either as 'literacies' or as 'generic skills' for employment.

There appear to be three main models of literacy which have implications for Australian policy-making, teaching and learning. These are the:

- cognitive, individual-based model, which assumes that levels of ability can be tested
- economics-driven model associated with workforce training, multi-skilling, productivity and the idea of 'human capital'
- socio-cultural model, which believes that the meaning of literacy depends on its context and thus, can have different interpretations.

The third model is preferred by the authors. Literacy, it is argued, can no longer be linked uncritically to demands of the economy and national training agenda. Although current research puts literacy with social practice, government policy aligns more with the traditional model of literacy as a set of foundation skills required by every individual.

▶ Messages for policy and practice

Research indicates the need for a new national definition and policy for literacy, recognising changing social and economic realities and ethnographic studies of literacy.

A new literacy policy should recognise non-print technologies, especially the literacies of information and communications technology (computer literacy).

Recognising literacy as a social practice, literacy policies should support the need for increasing the knowledge of the entire community, and not simply the skills of the individual.



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Government policies should reflect that literacy needs will change over time with the age, sex and language of users. Literacy needs will also vary according to the context of use and ought to accommodate the full range of literacies found in society.

Literacy policies should be integrated at federal and state levels, supporting lifelong learning and improvements in adult literacy.

In literacy testing, there is a concern that national approaches rely too much on what is perceived to be the most dominant cultural, educational and social 'norm', or what is known as 'dominant literacies', in society. In addition, those who fail to meet the national standard are often blamed for their 'poor' performance, with no recognition that they may be from another ethnic or cultural group.

The more complex concepts of 'multiple' and 'situational' literacies include the ability to interpret and construct information, or to learn specific workplace literacies such as computer or science skills. These challenge traditional testing and benchmarks, and more thought should be given to other monitoring and accounting mechanisms. Such measures might be disinclined to mark individuals off against a dominant national standard, and more likely to value local (for example, Indigenous or ethnic) or less dominant literacies.

► Messages for employers and trainers

Trainers need to be able to recognise and teach the different literacies that learners require, valuing local as well as dominant literacies.

Effective teaching practice begins with the learner, implying that the government and employer-oriented discourses of workplace literacy should give greater recognition to workers' diversity.

In their own fields, all teachers are 'teachers of literacy'. They should value the range of different literacy abilities (oral, written, visual etc.) that different learners possess.

There is no single, universal method of teaching literacy. Teachers should be prepared to use a variety of teaching and learning practices, and thus give students the ability to adapt what they have learnt to any situation.

Rather than simply reproducing what is taught, learners should be given the tools to 'make sense of the world and construct their own perspectives'.

Literacy in the new millennium, by Michele Lonsdale and Doug McCurry, can be downloaded from the NCVET website at www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1490.html