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THE FLUID **NATURE** **OF LITERACY**

A look at how the definition of literacy has changed, and what it means for today's students

By **Diane Barone**

*a*s I received the request to write about the changing definitions of literacy, I thought, “That won’t be hard.”

How naïve I was.

I quickly discovered that literacy is not simple to understand or define. I began by exploring definitions of literacy and found that Merriam-Webster defines it as the ability to read and write. Although the dictionary definition focuses on the ability to read and write, ILA members know literacy means much more than that. For example, what about interpretation of text or visuals?

Rather than trying to come up with a succinct definition, I thought it would be more appropriate to share ways of thinking about literacy. The following are just some of those ways.

Foundational literacy knowledge

When I read Becky Bloom's book *Wolf!* (Scholastic), I realized she summed up what is essential about foundational literacy knowledge.

As in many children's books, animals learn to read or write. In this book, a wolf joins other farm animals in learning the basic literacy skills. His journey begins by learning to write and identify the alphabet. He reads as beginning readers do: word by word.

The farm animals are critical of his emerging skills and send him away to practice. He follows their advice and returns reading quickly, but with no inflection or pausing; his reading is a race to get to the end of the text. Finally, he achieves a full orchestration of reading knowledge: knowledge of letters and sounds, knowledge of decoding, fluency and prosody, and the integration of all elements.

As the wolf demonstrates so aptly, foundational skills are a part of literacy, even with changing literacy definitions, which is a fact supported by the research of neuroscientist and child development expert Maryanne Wolf in her 2007 book *Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain* (Harper Perennial).

However, children's acquisition of foundational skills will be different with touchpad technology. For example, a child can touch a screen and a letter appears as its complementary sound is heard.

The traditional ways to acquire literacy skills are shifting.

Reading the screen and page

Today, we know the impact of the Internet on literacy and how it changes ideas surrounding literacy on a daily basis.

The work of researchers Donald Leu, Elena Forzani, and Clint Kennedy shows students now spend more time reading on the screen than they do in print material. I find that reality quite amazing and perhaps surprising. In fact, students

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easily move from one form of text to another depending on the purpose of their reading.

Just watch as students find information on their phone, view a website, post to a blog, and then consult a print-based book, all seamlessly.

Multimodal literacy

Multimodal literacy includes interpretation of visual, written, and performative aspects of text.

For instance, readers/viewers watch a video where they note how the creator used sound, panning, and other techniques to create meaning. They then move to a website where they engage with text, images, or video to explore the key ideas further. Following these activities, they read print text and take notes or draw sketches to engage in meaning making.

Gunther Kress, in his 2003 book *Literacy in the New Media Age* (Routledge), writes that the central medium of communication is the screen and the screen is grounded in image, not in words.

Multimodal literacy results in huge shifts in expectations for teachers' knowledge. Just knowing how to help students read print is no longer sufficient. Rather, teachers need to support students as they come to understand image, film, music, and other multimodal texts.

Social engagement

Students today develop literacy skills through digital social interaction and are using this outlet also to discuss and promote their reading habits.

Donalyn Miller, in her 2014 book *Reading in the Wild: The Book Whisperer's Keys to Cultivating Lifelong Reading Habits* (Jossey-Bass), describes how students share their reading with others through social networking. For instance, they write comments on Twitter about their everyday reading.

Literacy is now embedded within social practices that are supported with Internet access. This social connectivity results in high levels of engagement. And perhaps most interesting, these social engagements begin with very young children, as 25% of 3-year-olds routinely go online, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. For instance, Club Penguin and Webkinz provide the platform for very young children to become socially connected with individuals outside of their immediate family.

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Lane Smith's *It's a Book* (Roaring Brook Press) presents the fluidity of literacy as shared through Monkey and Jackass' conversations about the essence of a book. Jackass is fully immersed in new literacies as he is comfortable using his computer for reading and viewing. Monkey knows little about the Internet and is grounded in print media.

These two characters showcase social, multimodal, and foundational knowledge, and the importance of reading both the page and the screen.

Further, they suggest that not all of the changes to literacy are embraced easily. ■

HOW WE DEFINE LITERACY

We asked ILA staffers to share their thoughts on what it means to be literate in the 21st century, and their responses reflect the view that there are many equally true ways to interpret the term. The word has both academic and cultural implications, and it can elicit deeply personal perspectives of its global importance.

“Literacy is not just about reading words on a page. It’s about comprehending and applying meaning. It’s about being able to contribute to the world through words—spoken, written, illustrated. It’s breaking the code to reveal both how to get through the everyday and how to build a legacy for the future.”

—April Hall, *Literacy Daily* Editor

“Being literate in the 21st century means having the ability to acquire and convey information through multiple modes—reading and writing, speaking and listening, designing and creating—both independently and collaboratively. It’s being a critical thinker and a lifelong learner.”

—Shannon Fortner, Educational Resources Director

“Being literate in the 21st century includes mastering digital and visual literacy. The ability to use social media as a means to communicate can connect the cultural, social, and academic environments in which we all live.”

—Jayme Gravell, Social Media Strategist

“Literacy allows us to navigate our world and learn from everything in it. Literacy in the 21st century encompasses everything electronic, but hopefully will not diminish the love of books. Here’s hoping the young brains are still wired with the attention span required for the joy of books and illustrations.”

—Margie Bell, Education Relations Specialist

“If you ask what literacy means to me...I would say opportunity.”

—Tiffany Sears, Councils Advisor

“More than just understanding the ‘language’ of the medium, being truly literate is being able to identify the underlying message and to evaluate it critically for validity and value, and from there either absorbing that message or formulating a counter to it. Simply understanding what was expressed is not enough.”

—Wesley Ford, Digital Projects Manager

“Developing strong critical thinking skills is not only important in the digital age, it’s essential. You can Google just about anything, but if you don’t have the ability to interpret, analyze, evaluate, and process the information you find, then what good does it do you?”

—Lara Deloza, Communications Manager

“When we first decided to change the ‘reading’ in our name to ‘literacy,’ I thought a lot about it. I even did some research on cultures that don’t have written language, and cultures that are losing their native languages. It made me realize how important it is for every person to be able to communicate with others—and how much our personal identity is tied not only to our ability to communicate with our peers, but also how and what we choose to communicate about.”

—Gzifa Akuji, Business Data Analyst