

Adult Literacy and the Information Society

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Abstract

The requirements of 21st century literacy give meaning to the concept of information literacy. But the term as currently employed is not accessible to those who do not already possess basic literacy skills. If information literacy is to truly advance the capabilities of the world's population in the new economy, we need to understand and address the needs of the world's least advantaged population.

1. INTRODUCTION

The advent of the Information Society, in which most activities involve processing information, has broadened the definition of literacy as we have known it. The definition of literacy evolved during the 20th century from the ability to read and write to the ability to perform basic functions of daily life involving literacy skills. Messages no longer appear predominately in printed form on a static medium. Many messages are flashed momentarily on a screen or appear as images with which we are expected to be familiar. Not only has the pace accelerated for understanding a message, but also the methods by which we access the message have become dependent on a range of information technologies.

Clearly, 21st Century Literacy requires more than just the ability to read, write and do math and science. Though reading still requires the skill of print literacy, for example, much of the information we encounter now takes other forms, such as graph materials or moving images, or appears in new formats in databases or on web sites. Yet, simply being able to use a computer is not sufficient either. Literacy in this new century starts with these skills. But it also encompasses a broader spectrum of technology and critical thinking skills, as well as a willingness to view the process of learning in new and different ways.¹

The concept of information literacy has evolved very rapidly to define the basic skills required to cope with changes based on information and communications technologies that have brought about the new economy of the 21st century.

“We are now playing on a much bigger and more complex field than before these changes took place, but it is a level playing field only for those who have a good education and strong basic skills.”²

Information literacy requires not only a mastery of cognitive skills (reading, writing, math), but also experience in applying them in the use of information and communications technologies. The basic requirements for information literacy are a challenge for the world’s most information-intensive nations. For the rest of the world, especially the developing nations, it is a formidable barrier. Most discussions of information literacy assume basic literacy. Yet, current estimates are that 1 adult in 5 in the world lacks basic literacy skills.³

If we persist in assuming a higher level of capability than evidence demonstrates, the outcome can only result in creating an even greater digital divide than is popularly known to exist. The entire global population will be affected by the new economy. If we are to be successful in helping people cope with these new realities, we must begin by embracing the full dimensions of the literacy problem. Perhaps, we should begin by making clear the nature and persistence of adult literacy problems.

2. READING

The ability to read is a difficult skill to acquire and an even more difficult skill to maintain and improve. Adults who master the skill of reading hardly remember when and how they learned to read. For those adults who never mastered the skill, or who struggled to become competent, the memories of embarrassing and painful moments are crystal clear. Throughout the world millions of adults, mostly women, lack the necessary knowledge and skills to participate in the schooling of their children or engage in basic health and hygiene practices.

From Latin America's street children to Africa's AIDS orphans to Asia's rural slum dwellers, the hundreds of millions of people living without enough to eat, with no clean water, with no opportunities to go to school or better their lives, are more than just an affront to our global conscience. Leaving their needs unmet undermines and corrodes democracy itself.⁴

While no one would assert that improvements in literacy skills alone would be adequate preparation for addressing the conditions Brown identifies above, increasingly it is recognized that basic literacy skills are a fundamental building block for lives that will need to continually adjust to changing circumstances. What then is the difficulty that results in so many adults in the global population with low literacy skills?

2.1 Reading proficiency

Many of the world's children reach adulthood with limited reading skills. What we know about reading development is that the core characteristic of poor readers is lack of phonological awareness. That is, the ability to understand the relationship between combinations of letters of the alphabet and the sounds these letters form in syllables, words and sentences. Because letters code speech sounds, this is a fundamental component of learning to read an alphabetic language. Interestingly, for some years now beginning readers in Chinese have been taught using Romanized spellings of Chinese words.

Moreover, some languages are more difficult to learn than others. For example, there are 1120 ways to code all of the sounds used in English. Languages such as Italian, Spanish, Czech, Finnish and Russian are much simpler to code. Italian requires only 33 ways to code all of its sounds. Poor readers, whether adult or children respond positively when specifically instructed in how to make the connection between letters and sounds. The exceptions are those poor readers who suffer from dyslexia, which is an inability of the brain to recognize precisely and consistently the relationship between letters and sounds.

Two common myths persist about the effects of early reading difficulties. First, it is commonly believed that early reading difficulties will disappear as children mature. Current studies show that children who are poor readers tend to be poor readers as adults. Second, slow readers are frequently assumed to lack intelligence. Yet, we know that some of our most brilliant adults had difficulty learning to read. Also, adults with low literacy skills frequently utilize cunning strategies to avoid exposure. Therefore, since the most common characteristic of adults who are poor readers is a limited ability to relate letters with sounds of the language, adult literacy programs should begin with an assessment of the learner's level of phonological awareness.

2.2 Reading comprehension

“The combination of deficient decoding skills, lack of practice, and difficult materials results in unrewarding early reading experiences that lead to less involvement in reading-related activities.”⁵

As complex as it may be, decoding is only the first step toward learning to read. The second step is the development of reading comprehension skills. Many adult learners who come to literacy programs learned how to decode at an earlier time. However, with little or no use, this skill atrophies. Maintaining and improving reading skills requires continuing practice.

The amount of reading relates directly to the development of vocabulary and the acquisition of general knowledge. Less reading slows this process. Even the choice of reading materials and exposure to language has an effect. The average children’s book exposes a child to 50 percent more vocabulary than listening to a prime time television program.⁶

Normally, governments invest far more in the teaching of reading than in the availability of reading materials that encourage the practice of reading. Yet, we know that without the continuing exposure to increasingly difficult reading materials, reading skills cannot be maintained or improved. If we understand the problem and know how to address it successfully, why does adult illiteracy persist? The reasons are as much political as economic.

3. IMPACT OF THE SILENT BILLION

Adult learners around the world are drawn from a marginalized population. They earn less than the average income; they live in areas where there are higher rates of unemployment, crime, and other social problems. Since they pay little tax and do not participate in civic affairs, political leaders seldom hear their voices. At the same time, many of them are parents who are responsible for rearing members of the next generation. Not only are they less productive members of their societies, they are creating another generation of less productive citizens. Investments in adult education and literacy programs have the potential for multiple benefits.

“An examination of several hundred applications for UNESCO literacy prizes awarded over the last 22 years has revealed many *multiplier effects* that investments in adult education can produce. Importantly, unlike government investments in childhood education, for which we must wait up to twenty years or more to begin receiving returns to our investment, *we get these returns in adult education almost immediately.*”⁷

Some of the areas in which the benefits occur include reductions in crime and recidivism, more productivity at work, better parenting and improved school performance by their children, and improvements in family health. A literacy component underlies virtually every major social problem that inhibits progress in both developing and advanced countries. Whether it is poverty, famine, disease, crime, or war, the victims and perpetrators are usually unprepared to pursue alternatives that require more knowledge and skills than they have. However, most social programs intended to address these problems seldom contain a literacy component.

4. 21st CENTURY LITERACY SOLUTIONS

Beginning in January 2003 and continuing until December 2012, the United Nations (UN) will launch a “Literacy Decade.” Stimulated by the Dakar Accord reached during the World Education Summit in 2000, there will be an attempt to mobilize governments and non-governmental resources to promote improvements in adult literacy throughout the world. While schools and other types of formal educational institutions will be the focus of these efforts, it will be important not to overlook additional educational resources that are uniquely suited to this effort.

The literacy movement received a needed stimulus in 2002 when the two largest volunteer literacy organizations in the U.S., Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America, merged to create ProLiteracy Worldwide. Volunteer in this context means individuals who have been trained as tutors for literacy training programs.

ProLiteracy Worldwide will be a major international advocate for adult literacy operating literacy training programs in 45 developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America, plus programs throughout the U.S. What it brings to the literacy movement in addition to almost fifty years of experience in educating adults with low literacy skills, is a commitment to work with other educational and social service agencies as partners to expand the availability of basic literacy training globally.

ProLiteracy Worldwide also brings experience with a unique set of methods that allows individuals to combine literacy education with field-tested strategies for human development across six action areas that it calls “Literacy Solutions.” These methods integrate fundamental skills, critical thinking, cultural expression and learner-initiated action to help communities assess their material and social needs and implement solutions to pressing local problems. By developing literacy practices in the context of local issues, learners gain access to information and develop expertise in all areas of community action. More importantly, they create a base of skills, information, values and confidence that enables them to continue development plans and efforts long after outside agents are gone. In collaboration with local partner organizations, ProLiteracy creates learning resources in local indigenous languages that are sensitive to local cultures focused on the six action areas.⁸

5. LIBRARIES AND LITERACY

Libraries, especially public libraries, are a critical element for addressing the needs of adult learners. They represent a bridge between traditional literacy skills and the demands of information literacy. Historically, libraries and librarians have supported the objectives of literacy education, but with few exceptions, have not been in the forefront of the development of literacy services. Libraries have expanded their role to include access to a broad range of information and communications technologies. Since they understand the importance of access to reading materials and other forms of communications to the development of reading comprehension and other information literacy skills, librarians can play a crucial role in the adult

literacy movement. Not only can they demonstrate that they are playing an important social role, but they also can expand the base of support for the institution. How librarians respond to this opportunity will be an indication of how broadly they see their constituencies in our developing world.

6. CONCLUSION

I have argued here that the concept of information literacy as it is currently promulgated assumes a level of capability on the part of the world's population that is not supported by the facts as we know them. Further efforts to advance the capabilities of those who already possess educational credentials or adequate cognitive skills will only result in a widening of a formidable gap that already exists between the "haves and have-nots" across the globe. The UNESCO International Decade of Literacy is a timely vehicle for reaffirming the need to embrace the full range of adult capabilities in pursuit of the goal of an information literate world.

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Endnotes

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8. ProLiteracy Worldwide (www.proliteracy.org) or contact womeninliteracy@proliteracy.org.