

New Literacies

Introduction

Literacy's relationship with knowledge is complex. In the evaluative sense literacy suggests having a valuable knowledge of what is written. In the functional, however, literacy is solely about the skills and meta-skills of reading and writing. The difficulty comes in making sense of both the 'knowledge' and 'skills' aspects of literacy. In effect, these are two sides of the same coin but it nonetheless presents difficulties when attempting to come up with a working and all-encompassing definition of 'literacy'. In addition, given that knowledge has 'broken away from its moorings, it shackles' (Siemens, 2006), it is difficult to know what kind of and which knowledge is relevant to a definition of literacy.

Taking a 'static' view of literacy is difficult in a world of fast-paced technological change. Whilst proponents could feasibly argue that the 'knowledge' aspect of literacy can remain reasonably constant despite innovations in reading and writing technologies, they would be hard-pressed to argue the same for the 'skills' aspect. Reading and writing using a wordprocessor on a screen is very different from using a quill and parchment.

Views of literacy

Hannon (2000) points out a distinction between 'unitary' and 'pluralist' views of literacy. The unitary view, he states, is predicated upon the idea that literacy is a 'skill' and that there is an 'it' to which we can refer - a single referent,

According to this view the actual uses which particular readers and writers have for that competence is something which can be separated from the competence itself (Hannon, 2000:31). In contrast, the pluralist view believes there to be different literacies. Hannon quotes Lankshear (1987) who links social literacy practices with a pluralist view of literacy:

We should recognise, rather, that there are many specific literacies, each comprising an identifiable set of socially constructed practices based upon print and organised around beliefs about how the skills of reading and writing may or, perhaps, should be used. (Lankshear, 1987, quoted in Hannon, 2000:32)

Pluralists believe not only that we should speak of 'literacies' rather than 'literacy', but reject the notion that literacy practices are neutral with regard to power, social identity and political ideology. By privileging certain literacy practices - intentionally or unintentionally - hegemonic power is either increased or decreased (Gee, 1996, quoted in Hannon, 2000:34). The pluralist conception of literacy is, to a great extent, similar to the postmodernist movement in the late 20th century. Whilst adherents are clear as to what they are against - in this case a 'unitary' conception of literacy - it is not always clear what they stand for. What constitutes a 'literacy'? What do 'literacies' have in common? Hannon attempts to bring some clarity by appealing to the notion of 'family resemblance', much as Wittgenstein (mentioned above) did for the concept of 'game' (Hannon, 2000:36). His argument is that although we cannot define 'literacy' in a way that would satisfy every critic, we can nevertheless know what it means in practice.

From Literacy to Literacies

The field of 'new literacies' has a relatively long history; it is a term that has evolved. From 'Visual Literacy' through to 'Digital Literacy', theorists have sought to go above and beyond the traditional conception of literacy being the ability to read and write using alphabetical marks made on a physical surface.

Most new literacies theorists seek to demarcate a new form of literacy, explain it in detail, and then explain how its status as an over-arching literacy containing many sub- (or micro-) literacies. Information literacy has been seen as one such 'umbrella term':

In the last decade a variety of "literacies" have been proposed... All of these literacies focus on a compartmentalized aspect of literacy. Information literacy, on the other hand, is an inclusive term. Through information literacy, the other literacies can be achieved (Doyle, 1994, my emphasis)

Other theorists propose various 'literacies' as being the true umbrella term, the synthesizing concept. Potter (2004:33), for example, states, 'Reading literacy, visual literacy and computer literacy are not synonyms for media literacy; instead, they are merely components.' It is perhaps most transparently and obviously stated in this definition of transliteracy:

Our current thinking (although still not entirely resolved) is that because it offers a wider analysis of reading, writing and interacting across a range of platforms, tools, media and cultures, transliteracy does not replace, but rather contains, "media literacy" and also "digital literacy" (Thomas, et al. 2007, my emphasis)

In this way theorists not only deal with the third condition outlined in an earlier chapter - that of the status of a particular literacy in relation to other metaphorical concepts - but they can claim the credit of, at least partially solving the 'literacy problem.'

Information literacy is a term so broad and ambiguously applicable that it too can be applied as an umbrella term. Fieldhouse and Nicholas (in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008) use a slightly different strategy in order to promote their tangential concept of being 'information savvy.' Instead of the latter being an umbrella term in its own right, they present it as being the other half of the jigsaw puzzle to 'digital literacy' in order for individuals to be 'information literate.'

Instead of attempting to come up with an umbrella ('macro') term in which to retro-fit micro literacies, it seems to make more sense for theorists to use 'new literacies' as a shorthand - as indeed many already have begun to do (see, for example, Beavis, 1998; Kress, 2003; Lankshear, 2006). Separating out the multitude of literacies seems, as Tyner states, somewhat artificial as they overlap to such a great extent. Whilst they can be separated, this should only be done for positive purposes:

The need to set one literacy apart from another can only be explained by a need to use the concepts for other reasons, that is, to strengthen the professional status of its constituencies, or to take issue with the approaches used by proponents. (Tyner, 1998:104)

Our focus instead should perhaps instead be upon a particular literacy as an 'integrating (but not overarching) concept that focuses upon the digital without limiting itself to computer skills and which comes with little historical baggage' (Martin, 2006 quoted in Bawden, 2008:26). Here Martin seems to have in mind the concept of 'digital literacy' although it is not the name of the term that is the issue. Instead, it is its explanatory power and utility in terms of conceptual understanding and applicability that is key.

After 'visual literacy,' 'technological literacy,' 'computer literacy,' and 'information literacy' ultimately proved unsuccessful many sought to find a term more in keeping with digital communications and the Internet age. Although the concept of 'digital literacy' was not invented by him, the beginning of real discussion of the term was the publication of Paul Gilster's 1997 book *Digital Literacy*. Despite the promising title, the book has been criticized for giving multiple definitions of 'digital literacy,' with Gilster's idiosyncratic writing style cited as a reason why it didn't have an immediate impact (Bawden, 2008:21).

Nevertheless, Gilster's work did begin to have an impact in the early years of the 21st century with others citing his 'generic expression of the idea' as a 'strength' (Bawden, 2008:18). Gilster makes no less than eleven attempts at a definition of the concept ranging from digital literacy as 'the ability to access networked computer resources and use them,' (Gilster, 2007:1) to it being 'partly about awareness of other people and our expanded ability to contact them to discuss issues and get help' (Gilster, 1997:31). The idea most cited by other authors, however, is Gilster's assertion that digital literacy is about 'mastering ideas, not keystrokes' (quoted in Lankshear & Knobel, 2008:2). This explicitly addresses the meta-level nature of literacy so conspicuously missing from earlier computer-related conceptions of literacy.

The 'impressionistic and wide-ranging' nature (Bawden, 2008:19) of Gilster's account means that, to a great extent, those following him and using the term could quote his work in support of theirs.

Moving from literacy to 'literacies' involves what Gee calls the 'social turn' and a focus on the socio-cultural aspect of literacy practices. This is explained by Claire B  lisle (in Martin, 2008:156) who identifies three conceptions in the evolution of the concept of 'literacy'. First is the model favoured by UNESCO, the functional model. This conceives of literacy as the 'mastery of simple cognitive and practical skills.' Most theorists in the literature - and especially those who espouse 'new literacies' - would see this as a definition of competence, not literacy. Thus, 'digital competence' could involve a basic understanding of how the internet works (e.g. hyperlinks) and having the practical skills to be able to navigate it.

The second model in the evolution of literacy cited by B  lisle is the socio-cultural practice model. This model takes as its basis that 'the concept of literacy is only meaningful in terms of its social context and that to be literate is to have access to cultural, economic and political structures of society' (quoted in Martin, 2008:156). It appears intuitive that individuals have to be literate for something, so within the digital sphere the socio-cultural practice model makes sense. It deals specifically with the disenfranchisement felt by those not literate within a given domain. The model can also explain how hegemonic power can be grasped or maintained by those with access to literacy tools. A good example of the latter would be the Catholic church in Europe in the Early Modern Period. Banning books being churned out of newly-invented printing presses was an attempt to control literacy practices. The model is also a useful call-to-arms for those concerned about liberty and equality in society - in other words, social justice. It provides an arena for discourse about the importance of literacy in living a productive and rewarding life.

The final stage in the evolution of literacy, according to B  lisle, is the intellectual empowerment model. This deals with the link between new tools and new ways of thinking:

Literacy not only provides means and skills to deal with written texts and numbers within specific cultural and ideological contexts, but it brings a profound enrichment and eventually entails a transformation of human thinking capacities. This intellectual empowerment happens whenever mankind endows itself with new cognitive tools, such as writing, or with

new technical instruments, such as those that digital technology has made possible. (Bélisle, 2006: 54-55, quoted in Martin, 2008:156)

If these conceptions of literacy have indeed 'evolved' from one another then they are additive; they build upon one another.

The New Literacy Studies

In the last two decades of the twentieth century an interdisciplinary group of academics including Brian Street, James Paul Gee and David Barton started to approach literacy from a sociocultural point of view. They continued to view literacy from a traditional point of view, as 'reading and writing', but looked to move away from defining it in a cognitive way. This became known as the 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS):

The NLS opposed a traditional psychological approach to literacy. Such an approach viewed literacy as a "cognitive phenomenon" and defined it in terms of mental states and mental processing. The "ability to read" and "the ability to write" were treated as things people did inside their heads. The NLS instead saw literacy as something people did inside society. It argued that literacy was not primarily a mental phenomenon, but rather a sociocultural one. Literacy was a social and cultural achievement-it was about ways of participating in social and cultural groups-not just a mental achievement. Thus, literacy needed to be understood and studied in its full range of contexts-not just cognitive but social, cultural, historical, and institutional, as well. (Gee, 2010:10) Literacy, therefore, was no longer a journey that a teacher could take a child upon to a predictable destination, but something that resulted from thought and an evolving understanding of the world. Literacy became a construct.

In fact, a plurality of literacies is necessary, NLS theorists argue, because texts can be read in different ways. The Bible, for example, can be read from a religious, historical or hermeneutic point of view meaning that literacy always involves 'apprenticeship' to a group. Being literate is always being literate for entry into a particular community or group:

Many different social and cultural practices incorporate literacy, so, too, there many different "literacies" (legal literacy, gamer literacy, country music literacy, academic literacy of many different types). People do not just read and write in general, they read and write specific sorts of "texts" in specific ways; these ways are determined by the values and practices of different social and cultural groups. (Gee, 2010:11)

Proponents of the NLS therefore never studied literacy directly but always through the lens of organizations, institutions and groups. It's 'manifesto' was a book edited by Cope and Kal published in the year 2000 entitled *Multiliteracies: Literacy Learning and the Design of Social Futures*. Despite this, Gee, one of the contributors to the book believes that NLS 'never fully cohered as an area' (2010:12). Confusingly, NLS bred the new literacies studies which, instead of focusing on viewing literacy in a new way, investigated literacies beyond print literacy. To demarcate the two, Gee refers to new literacies studies as New Media Literacies Studies (NMLS). As suggested by its name, the latter is particular interested the 'literacies' associated with media and popular culture:

The emphasis is not just on how people respond to media messages, but also on how they engage proactively in a media world where production, participation, social group formation, and high levels of nonprofessional expertise are prevalent. (Gee, 2010:19)

The research around literacy studies is extremely fragmented, with some adhering to 'multiliteracies', some remaining advocates of the NLS, whilst some are attempting to define NMLS under various names. Some reject - or are unaware - of these categories altogether and continue to focus upon individual an individual iteration of literacy. What is common to all, however, is the need to define what is distinctively different about reading, writing and making meaning in a digital world.

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