

Perspectives

What's in a Definition? The Implications of Being Defined and Strategies for Change

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Abstract

Definitions of literacy for adults range from school-based models to functional skills models to a social constructivist approach to literacy. The definition of literacy is especially important because assessment practices reflect an assumed definition of literacy. The author advocates that practitioners adopt a social constructivist worldview of literacy and offers challenges for reconciling the current emphasis on a skills-based model for accountability with this model of literacy.

Résumé

Les définitions de l'alphabétisation pour les adultes varient et elles vont du modèle de base de l'école jusqu'aux modèles d'habiletés fonctionnelles, allant même jusqu'à une approche constructiviste. La définition de l'alphabétisation prend beaucoup d'importance car les pratiques d'évaluation reflètent la définition à laquelle on adhère. L'auteur soutient ici que les praticiens adoptent une vision sociale constructiviste de l'alphabétisation et il leur offre des défis pour réconcilier l'emphase présentement mise sur le modèle fondé sur les habiletés avec son propre modèle de l'alphabétisation.

In a journal issue that is dedicated to the theme of adult literacy, it seems appropriate to think about the definition of literacy for adults. As Cunningham (2000) points out, "Definitions of literacy are not mere statements for academic discussion. They are implicit in local, state, and national assessments of reading and writing ability, as well as in public policies" (p. 64). Furthermore, even without widespread agreement on what literacy is, policymakers often establish goals to achieve universal literacy by a certain date (for example, in the U.S., the National Education Goals Panel, 1994). How will practitioners and researchers know when we have achieved

a literate society? I explore the issues of literacy definitions and the implications for assessments in this paper.

The Evolving Concept of Literacy

As an example of how the content of literacy has evolved, in the United States the National Literacy Act of 1991 defined literacy as: "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential" (pp. 3-4). This definition is based on an earlier, similar definition formulated by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1986) panel of experts that led to a national assessment of the literacy abilities of young adults. As stated elsewhere (Askov, 2000), any definition of literacy should be viewed within the historical context of an evolving concept of literacy. Over time, the concept of adult literacy has moved from a school-based model—driven by the assumption that literacy for adults can be equated with that for children—to a functional set of skills or competencies to be mastered, to the more recent social-cultural notion of multiple literacies (for example, see Merrifield, 1998.) Various countries have defined literacy differently in their policies and legislation, but many are looking to the United States—either to follow its policies or to reject them as models. Therefore, the evolving concept of literacy examined in this paper is based primarily on U.S. policy, research, and practice.

In spite of Venezky's (1990) attempts to define various levels of literacy, consensus about what it means to be literate has never been satisfactorily reached. Both Cervero (1985) and Harman (1987) state that defining literacy is an elusive task and that no single commonly accepted definition of adult literacy is possible. Some researchers (e.g., Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988) argue that any attempt to define literacy is a political act—that literacy is not an entity (such as a predetermined set of skills or knowledge) that one either has or does not have. Furthermore, Lankshear and O'Connor (1999) argue that literacy is not a *commodity* but that "literacy is practice ... the practice(s) people engage within routines of daily life" (p. 32).

Policymakers and educators, in their efforts over time to define literacy, have shown a consistent propensity to take a positivist approach towards the issue. In other words, these attempts make an underlying assumption that

everyone needs identifiable minimum skills to function in society, that these skills can be measured by “objective” (i.e., mostly paper-and-pencil) tests, and that mastery of these skills is the same as meeting such objectives as, for example, “possess[ing] the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy” (National Education Goals Panel, 1994, p. 10). An even more alarming tendency in the literacy field today is created by the funding process for program development: the monolithic purpose for adult literacy programs seems to be job acquisition. Quigley (1997), who traces the historical development of literacy policy, argues that this is a relatively recent phenomenon. However, other often-stated objectives, such as achieving one’s goals and developing one’s knowledge and potential, seem to be largely ignored today.

As I argue elsewhere (Askov, 2000), another way to view this issue is based on a sociocultural/constructivist worldview that defines literacy as those skills, knowledge, and practices that are needed to function successfully in the society or culture in which the individual is situated or desires (and has potential) to be situated. This definition implies significant variation among individuals (rather than a single set of minimum skills that must be mastered) and focuses on providing adults the skills, knowledge, and practices that they find most useful for their lives. Stereotypical views on what a person of a particular race, gender, or class can and cannot do become inappropriate. However, the implied critical stance toward current practice may run counter to the expectations of some funding agencies.

The Socio-Constructivist Learning Approach

Similar to non-formal educational programs in which both the teacher and students learn collaboratively, literacy programs can be built on the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed (Bounous, 1996). Literacy content and skills are not taught in isolation from the learners’ knowledge and experiences. In this approach, literacy instruction includes learners’ application of literacy skills and action that incorporates uses of literacy. Learners construct new knowledge and skills by interacting with others and with objects, events, and processes in their environment, and then by reflecting upon these experiences. Learning that closely resembles the participants’ real world occurs as a social process involving others.

The sociocultural/constructivist learning approach, including the concept of situated learning (e.g., see Bruner, 1990), has great relevance to

adult literacy programs in my view. Teachers, along with learners, can design instruction to meet the learners' needs, interests, background knowledge, and skills within a particular context. In fact, literacy activities become meaningful to the extent that they are needed in interactions with others and with the content to be learned. Common knowledge and the experience of the participants are the basis for the literacy curriculum. In a family literacy classroom, for example, the common content could be the family concerns related to parenting decisions; in a workplace literacy setting it could be around the issues applicable in the workplace or needed for the job.

Some Perspectives on Literacy Assessment Practices

As I have argued elsewhere (Askov, 2000), how literacy is assessed indicates how it is being operationally defined. One must also consider the end user of the assessment data in deciding upon the most appropriate assessments (Askov, 1993). Adult basic education from its inception followed a traditional school-based model of literacy in which literacy achievement was assessed and reported in terms of grade levels, even though these are clearly inappropriate for adults. In fact, standardized tests yielding grade level scores have usually been adult versions of commonly used standardized achievement tests for children in spite of the fact that adults possess a greater amount and variation of experiences. Because the context of these experiences is crucial in adult learning and assessment, standardized achievement tests must consider these experiences in assessing literacy abilities. Although one can envision an assessment of basic mathematical calculations as appropriate regardless of the age of the student, assessments should be embedded in contexts; those used for children may not be appropriate for adults.

In creating a national assessment of adult literacy skills, the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS, see Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad, 1993) defined literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (p. 2). The NALS provided assessments of literacy by analyzing the tasks and skills that comprise literacy activities in three domains: prose, quantitative, and document literacy. (Other, less easily assessed, literacy areas such as writing were not included in the NALS.) National assessments of the three domains were created to measure mastery of those skills on five levels, with Level 3 being considered necessary to function in current

American society and workplaces. The assumption made in the NALS's development and use is that skills assessed in one context are the same as applied in other contexts. As with standardized achievement tests, this assumption is problematic (see Smith, 1998, for further information and analyses of the NALS; see Lankshear and O'Connor, 1999, for a critique of the NALS as an assessment of literacy; and see Sticht's article in this issue).

The NALS has had an impact on how literacy skills are assessed not only in the United States but also internationally. It was used as the model in developing the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS, see Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistics Canada, 1995), which was administered in 6 countries (plus the U.S. data from the NALS) to provide comparative data on the mastery of literacy skills. An updated version (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development & Statistics Canada, 1997) adds data from five additional OECD countries. Furthermore, the NALS data have been statistically manipulated with the U.S. Census data to provide synthetic estimates of the numbers of adults functioning at each level in all locations in the U.S. (National Institute for Literacy, 1998). It appears that the NALS definition of literacy, although not yet universal, may provide the operational definition of adult literacy, with Level 3 being accepted as a minimum standard for functioning in society. The GED Testing Service of the American Council on Education has raised the passing score on the new GED examination to correspond to Level 3 of the NALS which, in turn, may lead to this definition becoming even more prevalent as a measure and *de facto* definition of literacy. Although this may be convenient for policymakers, how useful is it as a measure of what literacy really means for adults?

The Challenge

Literacy programs on the front line seem to be the ones caught between the proverbial rock and hard place. On one hand, if their learners do not show improvement on skill-based, standardized tests of literacy, their funding may be in jeopardy. On the other hand, if they do not provide their learners with meaningful and relevant learning experiences, they will be unable to retain learners in their classes. The quandary for literacy educators is whether they allocate the time required for the sociocultural/constructivist learning model or whether they yield to the temptation to teach to the test in an attempt to produce gains that will assure the continued flow of funding.

One policy effort may offer a possible alternative to the positivist approach to instruction, assessment, and evaluation. Instead of analyzing the functional skills and tasks that comprise literacy activities, as the NALS did, the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) in the United States took a different approach toward constructing a model of adult literacy. Called Equipped for the Future (EFF, see Stein, 1995), this model relied in its development on adult literacy program participants' perceptions of the skills needed to be a literate person. The model is based upon ethnographic analyses of the written responses of 1,500 adult learners and defines literacy in terms of what a person knows and is able to do similar to the educational standards movement.

Stein (1995) reports that four purposes for literacy were identified in NIFL's essays: to use literacy to gain information (access); to express oneself (voice); to take independent action; and to enable one to enter further education, training, and so forth (bridge to the future). Three major roles for adults emerged: as a worker, as a family member, and as a citizen. The EFF model has focused on identifying the competencies needed for success in each role through "role maps." Generative skills—communication, interpersonal, decision-making, and lifelong learning—that cut across these roles have also been identified in the process of development. The model offers an alternative programmatic structure for comprehensive programs that no longer embrace a reproduction of the K–12 curriculum and eschew using grade levels as the reporting framework for achievement. The crucial issue, however, is how progress and competency in each of these roles is measured.

An excellent report from the National Institute for Literacy (Ananda, 2000) describes the plans for developing performance-based assessments that link to the EFF standards. It also provides helpful examples and background information on performance-based assessments. In practice, however, will the standards of commercial testing be applied, as commonly practiced by policymakers and funding agencies, or will performance-based assessments be accepted as legitimate demonstrations of learning for program accountability and funding? How will the definition of literacy be reflected in the EFF assessments? In the next section, I explore how this worldview might be programmatically put into practice.

An Example

I have reflected on how literacy can be taught and assessed following a sociocultural/constructivist theoretical orientation. I consider the context of a community literacy program as an example. The suggestions I offer are based on my observations of various community literacy centre settings rather than on any specific study. Out-of-school youth and adults come to this type of program with many different needs and aspirations. Some may even be forced to come to the learning centre for, say, 20 hours per week in order to receive a welfare check (motivation and retention are key issues in delivering services to this population). Others may come to a literacy centre for their own self-improvement, whether to earn a GED certificate, to learn English, to improve their literacy skills so that they can help their children in school, or to attain self-sufficiency in their personal and financial affairs.

Instruction in this setting should be meaningful to the individual students in order to retain them as learners. However, highly individualistic approaches to instruction, such as a computer or workbook lab approach where individuals work in self-paced instructional materials, may need to give way to group approaches wherein learners can support each other in their efforts. Interest groups within the classroom could be created around issues of concern, such as housing, substance abuse, autobiography (personal stories), family history, raising children, health, and so forth. Students (with the teacher's guidance) might organize to learn about issues and present information gained in ways that can be shared with others. Students may create books for the learning centre or library, computer web pages for their class, e-mail correspondence with students in other locations, or other products that portray the group learning that has occurred.

In the process of producing these products, the students are learning literacy skills by using literacy for some meaningful task. They may have to read various materials (such as books, magazines, and newspapers) for information about their topic. They may have to write and rewrite (with teacher guidance) materials in order to share their learning. They may learn to communicate more effectively as they share their ideas with other group members. The teacher provides guidance and facilitates the learning. Direct instruction is offered on an as-needed basis. An important feature I see is that the literacy skills do not constitute the curriculum; the needs and interests of the students create the curriculum. This approach, therefore, requires well

trained instructors who know the scope and sequence of literacy skills and how to teach these skills contextually.

How might literacy skills be assessed when such an instructional model is implemented? Performance assessments, as planned for EFF (see Ananda, 2000), are certainly appropriate because the learner is being assessed while performing a meaningful and contextually relevant literacy activity. Some performance assessments require paper-and-pencil responses; others use computer simulations or real-life demonstrations of competency. Good examples of performance assessments are the National External Diploma Program of the American Council on Education, an alternative to the GED examination, and Curriculum Associates' *A Day in the Life...Assessment* that assesses literacy skills through computer-based simulations of real problems encountered in a workplace.

Some literacy programs are experimenting with other alternative assessments, such as informal, teacher-made assessments (see Askov, Van Horn, and Carman, 1997, for a discussion of these various assessments). For example, some centres may administer teacher-made criterion-referenced assessments that assess mastery of literacy skills in the same context in which they were taught (for example, in a workplace literacy program). Other instructors are having the students create portfolios of their best work to document their learning for themselves and for others. The student self-report method is also commonly used to document learning; most centres routinely ask students about their goals upon entry into a program and then ask students if their goals have been met upon exit. Some instructors are trying to track the use of literacy practices (such as going to the library or using a dictionary) with the assumption that increased use of literacy skills indicates growth in literacy skills. These approaches have all incorporated quantitative measures and qualitative information in an attempt to document student progress. All require highly sophisticated instructors who are willing and able to spend the time needed to develop, score, and monitor alternative assessments.

It is not unreasonable for funding agencies to require documentation of program impact. How can these various alternative assessments be used to quantify progress in literacy acquisition? One can imagine some or all of the above alternative measures being used for student assessment and program evaluation. The key is to derive quantitative data from these measures. Perhaps the one measure that might seem to offer the greatest challenge is

portfolio assessment. However, much has been written on this topic (e.g., see Holt & Van Duzer, 2000; Moran, 1997; Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994) in not only K-12 but also adult education. Briefly, one can imagine students' portfolios being evaluated on various dimensions, such as content and presentation, on a 5-point scale. The portfolio could be evaluated by several teachers (and even other students) to obtain greater objectivity in scoring. A student's subscores could be averaged if a single score is needed for program evaluation. Furthermore, web-based portfolios presented on the Internet are public examples of the learning that is taking place in the classroom.

It is not difficult to imagine alternative assessments providing quantitative data in lieu of (or as a supplement to) standardized tests. The advantage is that these assessments can be contextually relevant and valid. If students are taught a literacy skill (such as reading for the main idea) with materials from the workplace, then mastery of this skill is best assessed with similar rather than generic materials. I worked with teachers from several workplace sites to construct charts that indicated whether or not students had demonstrated 80% mastery of skills on teacher-made assessments administered after instruction. Student progress was reported in terms of the number of assessments on which they were able to demonstrate mastery (80% correct).

In documenting increases in students' practices of literate behaviours, teachers may have to rely to a large extent on student self-report. Students could be asked at the beginning of a program (and periodically) to list how many times in a week that they read a magazine or newspaper, read to their children or help their children with their homework, check a word in a dictionary, go to the library, send an e-mail message or check the Internet for information, and so forth. Such data may not be perfectly accurate, but they may indicate that students are engaging in literate behaviours. Data about the students' literacy practices could also be obtained from others (with the students' permission), such as from family members, employers, or referral agencies. Increased use of literacy skills promotes improvement in literacy. Practitioners, through action research, may want to compare results obtained on these alternative assessments with standardized test scores to see if similar improvements are obtained.

Implications for Practice

What is the operational definition of adult literacy implied in this worldview and program practice? These literacy instructional and assessment approaches indicate the need for an operational definition of literacy. Literacy is contextual; it is not a "one size fits all" curriculum or list of skills. Individuals vary in their need for literacy skills over time. Literacy acquisition may best be seen as an ongoing activity (lifelong learning), with students dropping in and out of programs as their needs for literacy change. Literacy is multi-dimensional—more than can be measured by paper-and-pencil tests. Literacy is a set of practices that may best be defined by a set of literate behaviours. As such, an increase in literate behaviours may be the best indicator that literacy skills are being acquired. Literacy is interactive and dynamic. It is best taught in group settings while students solve real-world problems that are important to them. Literacy requires reflection; students need to think about how they use literacy skills in real-world problem-solving. Literacy also requires demonstration; creating a product (group or individual) demonstrates that learning has occurred. Literacy instruction, as defined in these ways, requires highly skilled teachers who are willing and able to do the extra work associated with this approach.

Some states as well as some Canadian provinces accept this type of information as documentation of progress in learning. However, most jurisdictions also require some type of standardized assessment for certification. As long as both types of assessments are considered valid in student assessment and program evaluation, then both are worthwhile doing. Unfortunately, in the United States, policymakers currently tend to rely more on quantitative measures, such as standardized tests, which can be more easily summarized and presented. Data generated from socio-constructivist instructional approaches are multi-dimensional and sometimes conflicting. These data lack the simplicity of single test scores that can be analyzed for gains over time. Yet they represent the real concept of literacy that is *multi-faceted* and complex. These data reflect literacy as it is used and demonstrated in the real world of the students.

The main challenge I see to implementing the situated, sociocultural/constructivist instructional and assessment approaches—which foster maximum learning—lies with the political agenda associated with the current legislation in the U.S. and similar policies or legislation elsewhere. *Ultimately*, such legislation determines how funding is allocated to

programs. At the heart of these issues lies the definition of literacy assumed in the legislative policy; consequently, this assumed definition determines how literacy instruction is designed, taught, measured, and funded.

If the field takes no action, and the status quo continues, then literacy will be defined by others in ways that are most conducive to simple answers. Practitioners will lose their voice in how their students are assessed and how their programs are evaluated and funded.

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