

# Literacy, social justice and inclusive practice



# Literacy, social justice and inclusive practice



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# Introduction

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This free course, *Literacy, social justice and inclusive practice*, will explore some specific examples of the tensions and debates linked to the aim of achieving literacy for all. You will focus on the current discourse related to the teaching of the technical aspects of literacy to a 'sufficient standard' and also on different perspectives related to becoming a 'literate person'. You will consider the implications for inclusive practice that arise from these discussions and the tensions that exist between individuals' agency and the structures of their social world. To consider how best to conceptualise inclusive practice given these tensions, you will be examining the way these debates impact on the potential of learners to engage with their social world. In particular, you will be looking at the way these different views and their implicit conceptualisations of literacy have the potential to both enhance and limit literacy engagement and learners' participation in the world.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [EE815 \*Understanding literacy: social justice and inclusive practice\*](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand key concepts associated with the study of literacy
- recognise some of the contested positions in relation to literacy
- understand issues associated with a global agenda for literacy for all
- understand that literacy can be seen as a cultural activity and that its significance is historically situated.

# 1 Learning as a dynamic, participatory process

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Educators and learners face continually changing educational structures, resources, technologies and differing ideas about what it means to be literate. There is a complex interaction between the agency of learners and the structures that shape their educational settings and experiences. In this course, we use the term 'agency' to mean all people's inherent capacity to engage, interpret and make choices within their particular social world and lived experiences. There are tensions between agency and structure, since they are social arrangements which can increase as well as limit the opportunities of learners to participate in learning situations and the world around them, particularly where it relates to issues of literacy.

In this course, you will explore learners' ability to engage with, understand and produce text in order to participate in, negotiate and understand their social worlds. This requires recognising and placing an emphasis on the learners' involvement with literacy as a dynamic and participatory process of engagement. This viewpoint underpins what we mean by 'inclusive practice' and its relationship to literacy and social justice issues.

## Activity 1

Approx. 15 minutes

Take some time to record your views on what inclusive practice is and how you would support or achieve it.

## 2 Global literacy and 'literacy for all'

A global agenda of education for all has long been seen as the means of enabling social, economic and human development. This has been particularly evident in the work of the United Nations (UN), for example, the 1960 Convention Against Discrimination in Education, and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which enshrined a right to education. In 1990, a World Declaration on Education for All was adopted in Jomtien, Thailand, by participants from 155 countries and representatives of 150 governmental and non-governmental agencies. Global literacy is seen by many to be central to this agenda. For instance, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) views literacy as being at the heart of a 'basic education for all' and promotes literacy as being essential for individual self-actualisation, personal growth and social progress. (See, for example, the literacy section of the [UNESCO website](#)). However, achieving literacy for all has been and continues to be extremely problematic, with the failure of numerous literacy campaigns over the past decades (see, for example, Elwert, 2001).

Literacy campaigns designed to promote 'literacy for all' are only seen to be successful if engagement with literacy is sustained and maintained over a period of time. It is also recognised by many literacy educators that achieving the aim of 'literacy for all' requires more than a focus on basic, functional literacy. However, despite this, most global literacy campaigns have focused on functional literacy rather than a wider view of literacy, which encompasses the promotion of personal empowerment and supports wider social and human development.

As seen from the [UNESCO statement on literacy](#), literacy for all stresses the developmental and societal impact of increasing literacy rates. The literacy for all agenda is seen as empowering and giving learners agency. Increasingly, however, it has become evident that the goal of literacy for all cannot be achieved by concentrating solely on an individual's ability to read and write.

For text-based literacy to become a self-sustaining activity there has to be the development of a literate environment and culture that fosters social interaction and interaction (see, for example, Elwert, 2001; Goody, 1986; Street, 2013). Literacy learners need to find material that is relevant for them to read; they also need to be immersed in a literate environment. This requires print-rich educational settings, which promote written language and text-based communication. A history of literacy campaigns has also shown that for literacy for all to be sustained, and for it to contribute to empowerment and human development, it must be seen to have a social as well as an economic purpose. For example, Elwert (2001), in his analysis of the failure of literacy campaigns in promoting literacy for human development, argues that literacy is only sustainable and self-producing if it is tied to both social and economic development.

### Activity 2

Approx. 1 hour

1. Read Leach, A. (2014) '[Not just a numbers game: improving global literacy](#)', Guardian, 17 February.

Answer the following questions:



- a. What was your first impression of the UN brief mentioned in paragraph 1 of this reading?
- b. What were your thoughts about this brief after reading paragraph 2?
- c. What do you think about the reasons behind and critiques of the UN goal of literacy for all given in the last two paragraphs of the article?
- d. What views are you developing on literacy and the goal of making everyone literate?

2. Search for articles and information about global literacy and goals related to achieving literacy for all. To narrow down your search, you may want to focus initially on a couple of newspaper articles and relevant policy documents and use these as a starting point to find more information.

### Discussion

The authors of this course searched for newspapers, policy documents and educational development literature related to global agencies such as UNESCO and its predecessors. We found world literacy/illiteracy maps in UNESCO publications particularly interesting.

For example, the UNESCO maps (e.g. the June 2014 map reproduced as Figure 1 below) appeared to emphasise the links between the compulsory access to schooling and higher literacy rates. The maps related to adult literacy seem to highlight the connection between economic development and low adult literacy rates.

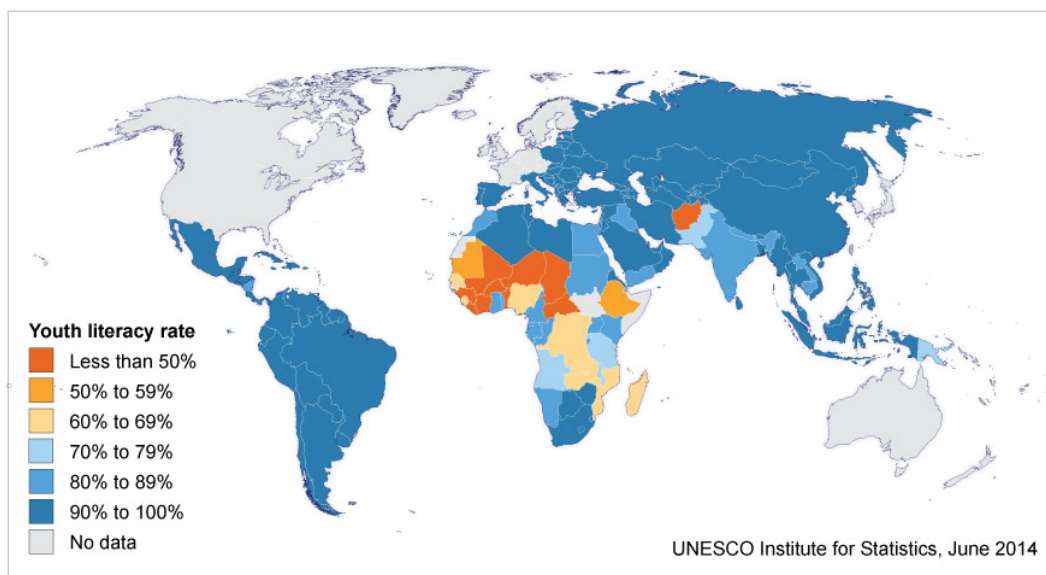


Figure 1 World youth literacy map  
(UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2014)

However, we also noted that, as indicated by Leach (2014), developing literacy for all in an empowering way and for social betterment is not a straightforward, unproblematic process. Global and local literacy development is mediated by a number of different factors such as class, gender, social status, home language and location (rural or urban). These factors impact on literacy rates in various ways in different countries and local areas.

The literature on global and national literacy development suggests that the view of literacy skills as having the potential to develop economic and social progress has long

been accepted and has been one of the arguments that has been used to support the development of compulsory schooling in many countries. We can also see an increasing emphasis on the economic cost of poor literacy levels over the past couple of decades. This is often linked to arguments for raising national and global literacy standards.

You may have found that, like Leach (2014), your search through the literature and sources raised questions and highlighted the complexity of achieving literacy for all, which is relevant to those engaged in supporting learners to become literate. For example, can we only focus on teaching functional literacy if we want to empower learners to engage with and be included in all aspects of the world that they live in? If we value participation and social engagement as a key aspect of inclusive practice, should we be supporting literacy for all purely in terms of a supposed economic gain for the wider society?

## 3 Literacy and economic growth

As you have seen by examining global literacy and the drive to deliver literacy for all, literacy is widely viewed as empowering, and a contributor to economic success, not only for individuals and groups but also for whole countries, regions and for all humankind as a collective entity. The identification of the terrible personal and social consequences of non-literacy is not just a contemporary concern; it has been stressed historically, particularly in relation to supporting increased participation in education at all levels. For example, the need to enable all to become literate was particularly emphasised in the 19th and 20th centuries, because literacy was equated with civilisation at both the individual and societal level.

However, there is currently no common agreement on how to achieve literacy for all. It has also been argued that it is only since the 1990s that we have begun to understand the impacts and consequences of literacy for individuals and for groups of individuals (Graff, 1991). These newly acquired insights are, in turn, leading to a revision and correction of strongly held beliefs and presumptions about the role that literacy plays in our lives and futures. Harvey Graff, whose work has become internationally recognised both among literacy historians and other social scientists, points out that our normative assumptions and expectations about the effects of increased literacy arise from particular liberal enlightenment-based theories. These theories have promoted the role of literacy and schooling in increasing socioeconomic development, social order and individual progress. Graff refers to this as the 'literacy myth' (Graff, 1979, 1981, 1987, 1991). In his work, Graff uses the concept of the 'literacy myth' to argue that we need to ask new questions about the role and impact of literacy and the often-made assumptions that we are facing a 'literacy crisis' and a 'decline in literacy'. He notes that the debates over literacy standards do not tend to include discussions over how literacy is being interpreted (Graff, 1991, p. 3) and that it is not always clear what is being measured and assessed when evidence about a decline in literacy standards is being considered.

### Activity 3

Approx. 2 hours

Using a search engine of your choice, search online for information on Harvey Graff and work connected with his concept of the 'literacy myth'. Make notes on this search.

You should be able to find details and information about his published articles and his seminal 1987 book *The Labyrinths of Literacy*. There are also a number of videos of Graff speaking and updates on his work on the 'literacy myth' available online (e.g. on YouTube).

Consider the following questions:

1. What does Graff mean by the 'literacy myth'?
2. Where did the concept of the 'literacy myth' come from?
3. What research approaches and methodologies do you think have underpinned Graff's research and development of the concept of the 'literacy myth'?
4. How do you think Graff's research methodology differs from the approaches of economists interested in the relationship between literacy and economic growth?
5. How could Graff's research methodology explain the different views on the links between literacy and the economy?

6. What do critics say about the literacy myth?
7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the critiques they make?
8. To what extent do you think the literacy myth needs to be revised given the time that has elapsed since Graff first coined this term?

#### Discussion

In your search on Graff and his work on the 'literacy myth', you may have noted that he uses this concept to point to the problems with the belief that economic development is dependent on the acquisition of literacy. He questions the assumption that literacy will necessarily lead to economic development and an 'onwards and upwards' progressive improvement in social mobility, as well as an enhancement of other social and individual aspects, such as democratic practice and cognitive improvement. The phrase the 'literacy myth' dates from 1979; however, it has come into prominence again with the current tendency to stress the links between literacy and the economy in numerous educational and curricular policies and in the work of economists interested in investigating aspects of human capital and economic growth.

You may have noted when reflecting on the questions above that while Graff drew on a historical analysis in his work, he drew on quantitative rather than qualitative data. You may also have been interested in his argument that if he were undertaking this analysis today, he would use both quantitative and qualitative data to explore the historical resources. In our reading of this article, we, the authors of this course were struck by Graff's comments that implied that his initial conceptualisation of the literacy myth may have overemphasised the limits of literacy's relationship to the economy. Graff (2010) now argues for a greater balance in viewing this relationship. He calls for recognition of 'literacies' rather than a single literacy. Furthermore, he also points out the need to consider dimensions beyond alphabetic and text-based literacy with the advent of the literature related to new literacies and digital literacy. This need to recognise the multifaceted, dynamic and changing nature of literacy, especially in the contemporary contexts related to the 'information age', will also emerge in other sections of this course.

## 4 Global literacy and educational policy

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We will now ask you to look back and reflect on global literacy agendas by looking more closely at initiatives for adult literacy and a particular case study of adult literacy in the UK. You will examine in depth how equity, equal opportunity and social inclusion are being influenced by global trends and governance.

Hamilton and Pitt (2011) make numerous arguments in relation to global discourses that govern literacy policy at a national level. Adult literacy was not highlighted as a particular problem in 'richer' western countries until the 1950s. Compulsory schooling for all secondary students was not established in most western countries until the 1930s–1940s – we note that concerns about adult literacy did not become prevalent until compulsory schooling for all school-based learners was established. We note also that international and globally based agencies such as UNESCO were not developed until after the Second World War. The international agencies which focus on the economy, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), were developed and shaped at the Bretton Woods conference in the USA, and the conference delegates were strongly influenced by the Great Depression, the Second World War and the post-war economic circumstances (see Steil, 2013).

At the end of the Second World War, American rather than European interests dominated the views of economic historians and other commentators. They stressed free-market economics and neoliberal policies, and held an implicit belief in the power of the market and its potential to foster economic progress, development and social equality. Hamilton and Pitt (2011) highlight the way in which the OECD is seen by many commentators and academics working in literacy policy-related fields to be central to the globalisation of educational policy. This consequently has influenced policies surrounding adult literacy and literacy education in general. This suggests that not only are adult literacy and other literacy discourses being shaped by globalisation but also that globalisation and the discourses that surround it have, in turn, been shaped by the particular historical or socioeconomic situations that have formed them.

Hamilton and Pitt describe how the creation of global organisations, such as the OECD and UNESCO, has enabled the collection of global statistics and subsequently the formulation of league tables. These, in turn, have shaped policymakers' conceptions of equity and 'deficits' in relation to adult literacy among specific social groups.

Hamilton and Pitt (2011) highlight key themes that run throughout this course. They argue that the social, economic and cultural contexts which have surrounded literacy acquisition across the globe since 1945 are not fixed. These contexts reflect continuity and change which, in turn, impact on literacy policies designed to promote inclusion and address social justice issues.

## 5 Defining literacy and illiteracy

As you will find as you read around the subject, many readings highlight the difficulties in defining what is literacy and therefore what is non-literacy or illiteracy. Another key point is that decoding print is a key aspect of literacy but not the only focus. The literature surrounding 'literacy for all' initiatives has presented arguments and evidence that programmes designed to promote literacy inclusion also need to take into account the fact that literacy is more than a set of skills. Literacy must also be viewed as being grounded in wider cultural, social and political contexts.

Historically, educationalists focused on reading and writing instruction rather than teaching literacy. Literacy was not usually associated with skills, and describing a person as being 'literate' referred to someone familiar with the canon of English literature (or 'western canon') rather than a person who could effectively read print (see, for example, Mathieson, 1975; Williams, 1965). By the middle of the 20th century, however, the influence of psychometrics and psycholinguistics on literacy education had led to a change of emphasis from 'becoming literate' to a focus on teaching the technical skills associated with 'reading', that is how to decode and encode printed text.

The development of adult literacy programmes in the 1970s brought alternative approaches and conceptualisations of how to tackle literacy teaching. Paulo Freire and other literacy educators in South American countries and Cuba demonstrated the importance of developing literacy programmes which enabled the groups of adults they worked with to become socially and politically empowered. These adults would then be able to act on and bring about changes and address injustices in the situations that they faced in their everyday lives.

### Activity 4

Approx. 1 hour

1. Make some notes on how you would explain the terms below:

- literacy
- illiteracy
- literacy difficulties
- functional literacy
- critical literacy
- the western canon
- printed text
- phonology
- orthography
- semantics
- syntax
- morphology.

2. Which term is most relevant to the cartoon below?



HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO  
TELL YOU! IT'S EAGLE BEFORE SNAKE,  
EXCEPT AFTER FEATHER!!

Figure 2

3. Do an online search to check how specialists working in literacy fields and literacy-related research areas have defined the terms listed in Question 1. Record these definitions beside your initial definitions.

4. Make a note on how you think you are progressing in developing an understanding of these and other key terms that are addressed so far in this course.

#### Discussion

In this activity, we have asked you to think about literacy and concepts commonly related to literacy teaching. You may have already encountered concepts such as phonology and semantics, literacy and illiteracy in your professional practice if you work with literacy programmes. We also asked you to explain functional literacy, critical literacy and the concept of a western canon, and to investigate how these concepts are used in the literature. You will now probably be aware that an individual who is described as 'functionally literate' has very basic reading and writing skills. Similarly, if functional literacy is the stated aim of a literacy programme, policy or assessment, the emphasis is on teaching and assessing basic technical literacy skills. This is often at the level of being able to decode text and write simple instructions, etc.

The public perception of literacy is often that many adults are illiterate and that the numbers are much higher than they were in the past. After the reading you have done so far in this course, you may have decided that assessing how many people are illiterate is not a straightforward task. You may want to query the assumptions, definitions and statistics you meet in relation to literacy and illiteracy in the research literature as well as media reports. As Roberts (1995) indicates, the definitions of 'illiteracy' are often ambiguous and have varied through time. Also, as both Roberts (1995) and Payne (2006) point out, agreeing on what is illiteracy and the rates of illiteracy has been influenced by political agendas and different accounts by vested interest groups in relation to what can be considered as literacy, what is being literate, and what counts as being illiterate. Both Roberts and Payne highlight how defining literacy is complex and relates to a number of factors. For example, Payne (2006) notes that when the term 'illiterate' is used in the media, it mostly refers to a particular view of literacy, that is, adults being 'functionally illiterate'. The emphasis from this viewpoint is, therefore, on 'literacy basics', literacy skills and the decoding and functional writing of text.

## Activity 5

Approx. 30 minutes

Ask a friend or colleague:

- what they think literacy is
- what they think functional literacy is
- what level of literacy they think individuals need to acquire
- how do we know who is literate and who is not literate?

### Discussion

You may have noticed the limited nature of the conceptualisation of literacy in the media and in government policy. If you discussed this activity with others, you may also have encountered the argument that quantitative statistics and concise qualitative definitions are essential, even if they can be prescriptive. Moreover, you may have argued or have heard the argument that the emphasis should be on functional literacy rather than other aspects. Without this focus, illiterate individuals will be disadvantaged because they do not have the skills to become literate and function in society. However, as Payne (2006) counterargues, decoding the printed word is 'not the only way to function in society' (p. 229).

It could be argued that definitions and the extent of literacy and illiteracy must be definitive and quantifiable if we are to identify and address social justice and equity issues in society. However, even though it may suit us to want something measurable to enable us to address these issues, trying to quantify and define literacy is problematic. As Roberts (1995) argues, the danger is that the definitions and statistics, although seemingly straightforward and extremely helpful, can in fact be used by particular groups to further their own agendas and ideals about what literacy is for and how it should be used.

You may have also noted disagreement about the implications arising from the different views of literacy. Some people maintain that the focus should be on teaching functional literacy skills to support individuals and help them become part of a community of learners. Others consider that it is more important to take a wider view of literacy to ensure that learners became engaged and able to use literacy in their lives. There are also differences of opinion on the extent to which literacy can be seen to be an individual problem or is used to define a group of individuals as a problem. As you progress through this course, you will need to consider how you will decide to define literacy and why you will define literacy in this way.

Although acknowledging the complexities and difficulties in defining literacy, Roberts concludes that 'The pluralist perspective, while not without its difficulties, appears to have the most to offer in understanding literacy in the contemporary world' (1995, p. 412). This implies that the stance you take in relation to defining concepts such as literacy will, in turn, shape how you view inclusive practice in relation to supporting literacy development. For example, if you see literacy as complex and multifaceted or as a neatly defined and quantifiable unitary phenomenon, your choice will, in turn, inform how you will view, think about and engage in inclusive and literacy-related practices.



## 6 How is critical literacy different from functional literacy?

In the previous section we gave some explanations about the specific ways of understanding functional literacy. In this section we are going to ask you to engage as learners in the process of clarifying and developing your own understanding of critical literacy. As well as asking you to actively analyse the concept and relevant texts, we will be asking you to reflect on texts related to critical literacy.

### Activity 6

Approx. 1 hour and 30 minutes

1. Using a search engine designed to find academic papers, such as [Google Scholar](#), what information do you find if you search for 'critical literacy' as a keyword? Think about the following questions:

- How does critical literacy differ from functional literacy?
- How is the concept of critical literacy different from 'being critical' and concepts such as 'critical thinking'?
- How is critical literacy related to critical theory?

2. Choose two key readings that you would argue are related to critical literacy. We would like you to be clear about why you have chosen these particular readings as representative of critical literacy. Do they interrogate social issues such as poverty, equity, inequality, disability etc.? Do they critique power relations in institutions (such as the school), adult education, and the family?

3. Using a search engine designed to find academic papers, such as [Google Scholar](#), search for both articles listed below.

- Luke, A. (2012) 'Critical literacy: foundational notes', *Theory Into Practice*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 4–11.
- Perry, K. (2012) 'What is literacy? – a critical overview of sociocultural perspectives', *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 50–71.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What are your understandings of 'critical literacy' and 'functional literacy'?
- Can you see when you might use either approach in your own practice?
- Can you think of ways to critique both of these concepts in relation to your own engagement with literacy and/or your own experiences of working with learners?

### Discussion

Through engaging with Activity 5 as well as the readings in Activity 6, you may have noted that the concept of functional literacy positions literacy as a set of tangible skills.

Functional literacy also usually implies an emphasis on the cognitive, individually based, basic skills of reading or decoding print. Taking a functional literacy perspective towards literacy acquisition would, therefore, emphasise the individual and their basic literacy skills and rather than highlighting the ways in which individuals can use literacy to engage in complex and ever-changing social practices.

Critical literacy, however, has a different emphasis. As Luke (2012) points out, critical literacy has its origins in critical theory. It is thus underpinned by a notion that literacy evolves from entering into dialogue and engagement with cultural and social problems. From this viewpoint, functional literacy can be seen as a form of 'banking education' (Freire, 1970), with a passive learner, rather than stressing the need for a learner to be actively engaged in learner–teacher dialogue. Where functional literacy focuses on being able to read the words, critical literacy implies a need to interrogate the text for implicit meanings and agendas.

From this perspective, those who take a critical literacy stance often argue that functional literacy treats reading and writing text as a neutral technique, where nuances of meaning are not stressed. From a functional literacy perspective, surrounding agendas, cultural viewpoints and the influence of different agendas and groups would have very little, if any, influence on students' abilities to interpret and respond to printed text.

Luke (2012) refers to Paulo Freire and his literacy programmes as an example of a critical approach to literacy. He also notes that this perspective arises from critical literacy and its links to philosophy, sociology and Marxist theory in particular. This contrasts with approaches that have been influenced by psychology, particularly behaviourism and psychometrics. Two specific examples arising from these two very different approaches to literacy are Freirian literacy programmes and dyslexia assessment and related interventions.

Perry (2012) explores ways in which critical and social literacy practices, like Freire's programmes, attempt to focus on responding to the wider structural inequalities. You may have noted that this contrasts with the way in which functional literacy tends de-emphasise a relationship between literacy acquisition and wider power relationships or social inequalities. Programmes designed to develop functional literacy place the emphasis on the individual decoding text rather than on the wider social and cultural environment.

In her paper, Perry critiques the functional literacy approach. She specifically highlights how it excludes many ways in which people engage with print in everyday contexts and the contextual nature of communication. You may want to reflect on how you view this issue, and on the way in which you think that viewing learners as being deficient in technical skills may or may not be problematic for inclusive practice. For example, would you agree with Perry that literacy development needs to be seen within a wider context, of which formal education is just one aspect? Or would you support a counterargument that literacy needs to address barriers within the individual in order to produce proficient decoders and writers who can gain a functional level in literacy? It is often argued that gaining basic functional literacy skills enables learners to have greater opportunities and access to resources in society. The approach you would develop for learners who struggle with literacy could depend on your answer to these questions. The stance you take in relation to these questions would also influence what you would consider to be inclusive practice for these learners.



## 7 The historical development of reading as a pedagogical practice

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So far this course has highlighted the complexities and different stances taken in response to the question 'What is literacy?'. While this might at first glance appear to be a simple question, when examined more closely it is difficult to agree a simple, straightforward answer or definition for literacy. For example, there are definitions of literacy that emphasise literacy skills and the technical mastery of decoding words, and of writing and communicating clear instructions to ensure that all future workers can access information and communicate at a given standard in order to carry out their work efficiently. This view of literacy will often stress the technical and work-based skills, and worker–employer communications aspects of literacy. This differs from critical literacy-based definitions of literacy, which emphasise how literacy allows the literate individual to engage in the wider society and political processes. This contributes to the democratic process and can enable disadvantaged individuals to have control over their lives.

As well as these quite obviously polarised views of functional and critical literacy, it is possible to have views of literacy that emphasise other aspects of what is considered to be 'literate'. For instance, it is possible to argue that being a 'literate individual' implies a person who has an extensive knowledge of 'high-quality' literature and literary forms. In English-language contexts, this might include reading Shakespearian plays and other classic works.

Gillen and Hall (2003) and Green et al. (2013) focus on the development of literacy after compulsory education was introduced in many western countries in the late 1800s. These two articles both present views of the historical development of reading and the teaching of reading. Gillen and Hall (2003) trace their narrative forward in a sequential way from the end of the 19th century. Green et al. (2013), however, start from the present and divide their discussion up into thematic considerations rather than tracing a historical narrative. Interestingly, although Gillen and Hall produce a systematic historical narrative, they do not present it in a linear fashion culminating in a clear and straightforward definition of literacy, which would allow for clear measurements and unproblematic assessments of literacy achievement. Instead, they stress a historical progression towards a view of literacy as an increasingly complex phenomenon. They also mention that they have been selective in order to trace this progression. They trace the complexity of our research understandings of early childhood literacy from initial 'scientifically' individual and skill-based psychological influences, such as the behaviourist theories of the mid-20th century, through to an ever more complex view which currently encompasses the cultural aspects of literacy alongside broader disciplinary influences. Gillen and Hall also mention that they have been selective in order to trace this progression. They also imply that in order to develop a historical narrative like this it is difficult to avoid being selective. However, it is also possible to be selective and create another narrative (see, for example, Miles and Miles, 1999).

Green et al. (2013) report on a historical research project which focuses on Australian contexts. They concentrate on historical examples of reading lessons in primary and secondary schools, and the resulting emergent themes related to current and global contexts. They make the point that when looking at pedagogy and practice historically, literacy has always been about more than just teaching reading skills. They also argue

that there has always been a broader moral agenda underpinning how we have taught literacy; the importance of this agenda has differed at various times since the development of compulsory schooling in the late 19th century.

Whereas Gillen and Hall (2003) begin their narrative with the influence of psychology and scientific approaches on early reading research in the early 20th century, Green et al. (2013) point out that before this, the canon of English literature (or 'western canon') dominated curriculum policies and the teaching of early reading. They note that in the early part of the 20th century, reading and literacy teaching in primary education was underpinned by an overt moral emphasis on being a 'good reader' and reading the appropriate cultural canon. This view can be seen in the Newbolt Report (Board of Education, 1921) produced during this period in England, which, in turn, influenced former colonies such as Australia and New Zealand (see also Soler, 1999).

As Green et al. (2013) observe, the 1921 Newbolt Report and accounts of classroom practice during the early 1900s emphasised the teaching of the canon of English literature, rather than the techniques and skills of reading. This emphasis and understanding of literacy starkly contrasts with the views that underpin recent debates over how we now teach reading. Green et al. (2013) argue that this view of literacy also influenced secondary school pedagogies related to supporting reading and English teaching. They also note that there was a shift from emphasising the moral imperative, which seeks to foster good character and a knowledge of great literature, to a scientifically and psychologically based view of literacy with its associated supposedly neutral views of assessment and testing. As you may be aware, as well as the earlier 'reading wars' in the 1950s, many recent debates over how to teach literacy have reflected this latter view and placed an emphasis on functional literacy and decoding text.

Acquiring literacy at a functional level does not focus on using literacy to impart complex culturally specific meanings, or to interact and engage in complex social situations. It also implies a degree of passivity rather than agentive behaviour, as functional literacy does not encompass notions of 'multiple literacies' or the use of literacy to empower learners actively to engage in diverse and complex environments. Concentrating solely on functional literacy in global campaigns is therefore often seen as potentially keeping individuals tied to lower skilled work environments.

If we recognise that there have been changing and expanding understandings of what literacy is over time, we must acknowledge the complex nature of literacy. We need to view literacy not just as an individual skill, but as something that is also strongly rooted within social and cultural understandings and practices. And if we accept that people view literacy in different ways, we must also accept that this will have an inevitable impact on how we and others approach both learners and research into literacy.

### Activity 7

Approx. 1 hour and 30 minutes

To explore the ways in which different understandings of literacy impact on literacy and teaching, use a search engine designed to find academic papers, such as [Google Scholar](#), to find the following abstracts. Then, consider the focus and different methodologies behind both.

- Brock, C, Wallace, J., Herschbach, M., Johnson, C, Raikes, B., Warren, K., Nikoli, M. and Poulson, H. (2006) 'Negotiating displacement spaces: exploring teachers' stories about learning and diversity', *Curriculum Inquiry*, vol. 1, no. 35, pp. 35–62.

- Draper, R. J., Broomhead, P., Petersen Jensen, A. and Nokes, J. D. (2012) '(Re) imagining literacy and teacher preparation through collaboration', *Reading Psychology*, vol. 33, no.4, pp. 367–98.

#### Discussion

Both of these articles provide an overview of studies which focus on educators and practitioners as participants, and document their experiences of adjusting and transforming their practice to account for diversity. However, both studies are constructed in different ways and utilise different methodologies to investigate the experiences and reflections of these participants. Each of these different approaches makes different demands on the research design, construction, and the questions and aspects of the participants' perspectives uncovered by the research. You may want to use these two abstracts as a basis for finding other search terms to explore using Google Scholar or your preferred academic search engine.

## Conclusion

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In this free course, *Literacy, social justice and inclusive practice*, you have explored some of the tensions that have emerged from the shifting understandings of literacy and from the international drives to achieve literacy for all. You have considered how the technical aspects of literacy are frequently foregrounded, when it may actually be more appropriate to view literacy as contextualised practice, enabling people to interact and engage in complex social situations. How we understand both the form and function of literacy will have a profound impact not only on the way in which we view the teaching and learning of reading and writing, but also on how we view it across the whole curriculum. Such understandings both define how we ask questions about education and how we design research into key educational issues.

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