REDEFINING LITERACY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Nan B. Adams

The word ‘literacy’ has been a bit overused recently. It seems that everyday we are bombarded with new forms of literacy: cultural literacy, computer literacy, emotional literacy and even environmental literacy just to name a few. In its most traditional concept, literacy is the ability to read and write. What all of these new concepts are trying to do when they employ the term ‘literacy’ as part of their discussion and dissemination is tie in the notion of being able to interact and comprehend with the concept. So, as traditional literacy means the ability to read and write - or to interact with written information, computer literacy means the ability to interact with and comprehend computers.

The term information literacy simultaneously is and is not of the same mind as these other concepts that are trying to use literacy to describe their need. Yes, it uses the whole notion of literacy for comparison. No, it is not a separate issue from the traditional notion of the ability to read and write. What the concept of information literacy attempts to do is introduce the idea that just teaching the skill of reading is not enough and that the authority of what is written needs to be questioned for the accuracy or bias of the information presented. It also attempts to expand the traditional notion of literacy to include what is experienced through not just print media but all communication media.

A literate population is a desirable thing in a democratic society. It allows governments to inform their population in writing. It allows citizens of this society to interact and conduct their own affairs of business and pleasure. But what if not all communication is through printed text? What if not all communication, written or electronic, reveals the authority of the writer? Why shouldn’t reading comprehension include the notion that once comprehended, information must then be analyzed for accuracy?

Nan B. Adams, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Technology at Southeastern Louisiana University. She currently teaches courses in leadership, technology and information literacy. She also supervises numerous masters level action research projects in K-12 schools. She may be reached by email at nadams@selu.edu.
So, information literacy is not just an issue for librarians. It's an issue for teachers and schools. It's an issue for literacy, reading and lifelong learning.

**INFORMATION LITERACY**

Information Literacy is generally described as the ability to access, evaluate, organize, and use information from a variety of sources. Until recently most students could expect to deal with carefully selected collections of reference materials in libraries, as well as a fairly limited range of widely accepted texts in the classroom. The power and authority that has been afforded the printed word is an enduring and widely held certainty. With the advent of the Internet anyone can now make a Web page. How can you tell if the information on the Internet is reliable or not? A critical point about using the Internet is that individuals posting information aren't required to pass through traditional editorial constraints or undergo any kind of fact checking required in conventional published print media.

Support for acknowledgement and inclusion of information literacy strategies in teaching and learning includes the efforts of many professional organizations. The American Library Association and Association for Educational Communications and Technology have published information literacy standards for student learning (ALA/AECT, 1998). These standards fall under 3 broad categories of Information Literacy, Independent Learning and Social Responsibility:

**The Nine Information Literacy Standards for Student Learning**

**Information Literacy**

**Standard 1:** The student who is information literate accesses information efficiently and effectively.

**Standard 2:** The student who is information literate evaluates information critically and competently.

**Standard 3:** The student who is information literate uses information accurately and creatively.

**Independent Learning**

**Standard 4:** The student who is an independent learner is information literate and pursues information related to personal interests.

**Standard 5:** The student who is an independent learner is information literate and appreciates literature and other creative expressions of information.
Standard 6: The student who is an independent learner is information literate and strives for excellence in information seeking and knowledge generation.

Social Responsibility

Standard 7: The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and recognizes the importance of information to a democratic society.

Standard 8: The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and practices ethical behavior in regard to information and information technology.

Standard 9: The student who contributes positively to the learning community and to society is information literate and participates effectively in groups to pursue and generate information.

Attributes of an Information Literate Student

For a practical description of the attributes of an information literate student, Doyle (1992) describes the following attributes:

- Recognize the need for information
- Identify and locate appropriate information sources
- Access information contained in those sources
- Evaluate the quality of information obtained
- Organize the information
- Use the information effectively

The Big 6 Information Literacy Approach

One of the more popular approaches to integrating information literacy practices into classroom teaching is offered by The Big6 Information Literacy Model (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 1990). This information problem-solving model integrates information search and use skills into a systematic process to find, use, apply, and evaluate information. This model proposes that problem-solving encompasses six stages with two sub-stages under each:

1. Task Definition

   1.1 Define the information problem

   1.2 Identify information needed in order to complete the task (to solve the information problem)
2. Information Seeking Strategies

   2.1 Determine the range of possible sources (brainstorm)

   2.2 Evaluate the different possible sources to determine priorities (select the best sources)

3. Location and Access

   3.1 Locate sources (intellectually and physically)

   3.2 Find information within sources

4. Use of Information

   4.1 Engage (e.g., read, hear, view, touch) the information in a source

   4.2 Extract relevant information from a source

5. Synthesis

   5.1 Organize information from multiple sources

   5.2 Present the information

6. Evaluation

   6.1 Judge the product

   6.2 Judge the information problem-solving process (efficiency)

By integrating these 6 steps into teaching and information gathering in the classroom, students are provided a framework for gathering and assessing information. The developers of this model view information literacy as a transformational process that compels students to find, evaluate, and use information from various sources to understand and create for personal, social or global purposes.

In Conclusion

It is critical for teachers to devise educational activities that engage the learner in research activities that require critical analysis of the information they gather. Teachers must teach students to become critical thinkers, questioning observers and more sophisticated users of information. This requires the teacher to shift some of the responsibility of gaining knowledge from the teacher to the student and create learning experiences that allow students to develop questions, devise strategies to search for answers, and formulate conclusions. It is critical for the future of our society for us to produce information literate learners to enable them to assume their roles as productive citizens.
References


---

THE CAT WHO CAME IN THE ROOM

The cat who came in our room
To see us read was so pleased.
He came behind the chair,
But didn’t know where.
We said, “Where is the cat?”
But not a cat did we see.
The cat was right behind me!

KENNEDY SAMPEY
Grade 2, Age 7
Elaine Vining, Teacher
Berwick Elementary School
Berwick, Louisiana

---

SPORTS RIDDLE

I can get kicked.
I am brown.
I am an oval.
I get thrown in the air a lot.
I hit the ground and it hurts me because
Many big guys jump on me.
OUCH!
What am I?

Football

TIMOTHY HENRY
Grade 1, Age 7
Rhonda Balsamo, Teacher
Berwick Elementary School
Berwick, Louisiana