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DEFINING INFORMATION LITERACY AMID 21ST CENTURY SOCIO-POLITICAL BARRIERS

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The term information literacy needs redefining to remain relevant in a 21st-century socio-political environment. Many of us informational professionals realize that the former definition no longer fits the bill. Thus, some have already begun their quest for relevant meaning. As stakeholders, we need to start rethinking about the ways globalization is impacting our former concept of information literacy. Although the paradigm has long shifted, and the ship has sailed, yet, it appears that someone forgot to let us in on it.

The term information literacy has deep and complex roots in that many cultures and societies apply the term differently, in expanding contextual ways. Among the indigenous and oral community, language and culture continue to inhibit one's ability to join freely with mainstream terminology acceptance. "Learners' languages are often an ignored aspect of mainstream classroom literacy programs" (Wilks-Smith, 2019, p. 52). Many immigrant citizens encounter experiences in America that emphasize speaking "English, without any consideration of the linguistic capabilities of learners, across a diversity of languages" (Wilks-Smith, 2019, p. 52). For many, the inability to meet America's current standard of literacy has become costly, risky, and even unsafe, as scholarship directly impacts one's ability to access health, career, and safety information. In fact, "low health literacy is a barrier to effective patient care" (Seurer & Vogt, n.d., p. 51).

As professionals, how do we begin to define and measure literacy without challenging "policy-makers and practitioners to re-define literacy operationally, develop and apply appropriate methods of assessing literacy and consider and act upon the consequent policy applications (Ahmed, 2011, p. 179). Not to mention, in today's society, the use of the word

literacy seems to be attached to every connotation that requires knowledge. Today, there is digital literacy, health literacy, career literacy, travel literacy, social media literacy. You name it, and more than likely you will find it! Determining "what constitutes English literacy learning and who is a literate person in English in the 21st century has become a complex puzzle and a buzzword" (Lie, Moor, & Aghaei, 2012, p. 54).

Some believe that "because of the emergence of social media and collaborative online communities…information literacy should be reframed as a metaliteracy" (Mackey & Jacobson, 2011, p. 62). Literacy concepts related to theory and practice has been experiencing challenges and debates for over half a millennium. Its high-time now for libraries and staff to understand the complex history associated with literacy, as well, as their role in developing such like during the times when reading societies were prevalent. Overall, it is high time that we deem necessary a new working definition of literacy for contemporary American society.

LITERATURE

Defining information literacy in developing countries presents a challenge. Because for many, this term is perceived as a relatively new concept, although the use of such "is fairly well understood, practiced and pedagogically supported" here in the states (Fahmy & Rifaat, 2010, p.111). In places like the Middle East and North Africa region such concept is practically unrealized, yet, certain international professionals realize through their travels the "different definitions which are used in various world regions and cultures, and the concept's relevance to the advance of knowledge, research, and the general level of education in the Arabic speaking world" (Fahmy & Rifaat, 2010, p. 111). One difficulty in this region is the limit of materials available in other languages. Nonetheless, by "challenging the definition of literacy and

identifying where learners additional languages can play role, and the benefits of doing, it is hoped that these languages are no longer" perceived obsolete, but rather as a contribution to the widespread of democracy (Wilks-Smith, 2019, p. 27).

Often challenges related to literacy begin in the classroom where students of diverse culture are expected to keep up with the pace of a provided curriculum. However, what happens when the curriculum does not offer differential instruction, and language becomes a barrier to equal and accessible treatment? Are teachers expected to label students as having special needs, when, in fact, it is quite reasonable that a child is more versed in his language than that of another country? "In Australia, 21 percent of the population identifies that they speak a language other than English at home" (Wilks-Smith, 2019, p. 28). Thus, emphasis is often placed on the development and possession of English literacy as opposed to scholarship in general.

As it relates to health literacy, "more than two decades of studies" reveal that literacy is deemed the cornerstone when dealing with "a variety of health outcomes" (Rudd, 2017, p. 60). Thus literacy or the lack thereof carries a high ticket price when it comes to warding off infectious disease that could have otherwise been dealt with by deeming interpretative services just as essential as other classroom or workplace inclusions. Health literacy as defined by the "U.S. Department of Health and Human Services…is the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions" (Seurer & Vogt, n.d., p. 51). However, when stricken with an ailment, most often, immigrants and others choose to return to their domestication to understand and be treated for an illness, that perhaps, may have been minor.

Globalization has also placed an impact on the need to redefine literacy. "Technology has shaped the definition of literacy from the traditional meaning of having the ability to read and write to being a social practice that enables individuals to learn and interact with the world" (Alsalem, 2016, p. 205). Although reading and writing are essential components of becoming literate, globalization has expanded this concept to mean much more than that. Instead, it is a concept to be undertaken as a diverse way to intertwine with society.

Nonetheless, literacy is now looked at as tool to be used to connect with others, rather than offer personal gratification through possessing the ability to read or write. In other words, the emphasis was placed on using literacy for satisfaction. I need a job, so I must become career literate. I need spirituality, so I need to become religion literate. You get the point. It appears that there is no more prolonged gratification in the pursuit of learning, but rather, in obtaining.

In *Defining and Measuring Literacy*, three UNESCO statements were recorded to document the evolution of definitions related to the concept of literacy.	
1958	A person is literate who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life.
1978	A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his or her group and community and also for enabling him or her to continue to use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development
2005	Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying

	contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve his or her goals, develop his or her knowledge and potential, and participate fully in community and wider society.

(Ahmed, 2011, p. 181)

Most amusing, if I may say so, is this concept of "multiple literacies" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 183).

Thus there are many types of literacies representative of many different kinds of skills ---

"technological, health, information, media, visual, scientific and others" (Ahmed, 2011, p. 183).

In Literacy in American: Historic Journey and Contemporary Solutions, librarians and

other information professionals get the chance to understand the history behind the

development of this term. During Colonialism, this book offers an account on the African-

American and Native Indian pursuit of literacy during a time of civil and political unrest. It gives

credence to the stories we often hear about related to how blacks were brought to the

Americas and were divided to prevent an insurrection. Thus, when housed with other tribes,

one's native language once associated with concept of literacy and learning is lost. Therefore,

some cultures were forced to rethink information literacy while not only in a globalized setting

but in a foreign one.

Nonetheless, "language literacy learning can be defined as sustainable when it is a two-

way or negotiable, dynamic, quality-based process which socially, culturally constructed

between learners and learner – mediators" (Lie, Moor, & Aghaei, 2012, p. 57). When

contemplating how globalization puts pressure on one's need to rename information literacy

into metaliteracy, it is because technology has emphasized other forms including digital, visual,

media, and cyber. Thus this digital era presents the need for one to be informed of ways to

connect to the world via the internet and technology. Whether reconceptualizing the term

information literacy into metaliteracy can encompass the inclusions need for the new working

definition is perhaps listed among other debates related to the theory and practice of literacy.

Nonetheless, in Reading Societies and Lending Libraries in Nineteenth-Century Norway, we find

that "quite a few reading societies, parish collections, and lending libraries were established in

Norway." Thus a study on such could lead to reinventive ways to implement literacy across the

city, thus transforming the American landscape into a location rich in diversity and culture ---

while endorsing the literacy competencies of all.

Working Definition of Literacy

Producing a working definition for the term information literacy is a complex

undertaking. Similar to the fact that society has not yet agreed upon a working definition for

information policy due to the workings of theoretical pluralism --- to this date, no one has fully

decided on a working definition for this term either. Nonetheless, my working definition of

literacy goes like this:

> *Information literacy* is an existing framework to help meet, establish, and
>
> accomplish one's agenda toward learning. It is a concept, that if guided by
>
> professionals will ensure that at the right time, one will be able to either
>
> dependently, independently, or interdependently function in the world when
>
> opportunity presents itself. It is a fluid concept; therefore, one can remain
>
> confident that language, sex, gender, race, and other barriers cannot prevent
>
> one from becoming literate. Rather, such obstacles can only deter one from
>
> remaining in a specific learning environment. Information literacy is the vehicle

in which we related to the world and those around us. Information literacy

causes us to understand what we may not have realized until now.

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