The Past and Future of “Literacy”

SIMS 103, Dec. 6, 2006
Geoff Nunberg
Literacy: a linguistic curiosity

The meanings of *literacy*

Basic alphabetism: “literacy campaign”/“~ rates”

Skill in using the language: “A literate prose style”

General “cultural” knowledge: “The new illiteracy”; “A very literate conversation”

Basic knowledge in some area or field: “economic/geographical/media etc. literacy” (also “numeracy”)

Literacy = a word restricted to English
History of *literacy*, etc.

*Literate, illiterate* go back to Renaissance. (Cf noun *literate* = "one who takes holy orders without university education by demonstrating a knowledge of Latin and Greek"; "lady literate")

But both are rare words until late 19th c.

Modern sense emerges with formation of new word “literacy” ca. 1880, in America

Context of earliest use: census data, voting requirements, race, etc.

Suggests picture of alphabetism as a social phenomenon/subject of civic interest. Cf late-19th c. use of literacy rates as index of modernity & development.
Roots of the new sense of literacy

Introduction of compulsory universal schooling
Concerns about immigration, race (freedmen), training of work forces
Growth of “libraries movement” (Carnegie)
Literacy and the Libraries Movement

Reaction to perceived limitations of school system -- rote learning, inaccessibility to adults

1890: Charles Eliot estimates that it would take a Massachusetts high-school graduate only 46 hours to read aloud all of the books that were assigned in the last six years of the curriculum.

Establishment of library schools (Columbia, 1876), proponents of library movement -- “Apostles of Culture”

Increasing number of libraries:

1850: ca. 50 public libraries in US
1875: 300+
1920: 2500-3000
Two Functions of the Library:  
Political Object

Libraries (and literacy in general) as bulwarks against demagoguery etc.

[To the free library] we may hopefully look for the gradual deliverance of the people from the wiles of the rhetorician and stump orator…. As the varied intelligence which books can supply shall be more and more widely assimilated, the essential elements of every political and social question may be confidently submitted to that instructed common sense upon which the founders of our government relied. J. P. Quincy, 1876
Cf shifting view of importance of literacy as an instrument of social control:

"If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master." Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave
“The Uplifting of the American Negro”

The growth of new wants, presided over by intelligence and culture, is the best lever for raising the status of the idle, quarreling, sensual, ravishing Afro-American. Certainly the infecting of the backward portion of the race with a high estimate of cleanliness, neatness, family privacy, domestic comfort, and literacy is an agent quite as moralizing as the dread of future punishments or the love of an ethical God.

(Edward Alsworth Ross in the *Am. Jrln. Of Sociology*, 1898)
Socio-Economic Consequences of Literacy

A More Tractable Workforce

"Those who have been accustomed to exercise their minds by reading and studying... have greater docility and quickness in applying themselves to work [and] greater appetite, dexterity or ingenuity in comprehending ordinary processes." Horace Mann, 1849.
Requirements of Industrialization & The Changing Workforce

Women in bus. schools from 4% in 1871 to 77% in 1900
Growth of immigration, urban in-migration
Literacy rates as indicator of modernity
(In fact, literacy more often an effect of social advancement than a cause.)
The Triumph of “Literacy”: 1900-1975

Frequencies of *literate* and *cultured* in JSTOR Journals in Education and Language and Literature (normalized for corpus size)
“Literacy” as a Social Good

Emergence of notion of “functional literacy” after UNESCO report of 1956: “A person is functionally literate when he [sic] has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group” But effectively defined as 4th-grade education.

In US, “functionally illiterate” rapidly becomes a loose way of saying “virtually illiterate”

47.5% of the nation - almost 1 of 2 Americans are functionally illiterate!-- Web site of Literacy Now!, Inc.

Dorothy Allison's autobiographical novels and social commentary slices wide the underbelly of Southern female experience--growing up dirt poor and shamed, functionally illiterate in the language of love. Chicago Tribune
Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields

“Economic literacy” from 1950. Soon after: geographic, historical literacy, media literacy, etc.
Extension of “Literacy” to Other Fields

“Cultural literacy” from E. D. Hirsch: "What every American needs to know," "the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world"

What [Jeanne S. Chall] calls world knowledge I call cultural literacy, namely, the network of information that all competent readers possess. It is the background information, stored in their minds, that enables them to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications, relating what they read to the unstated context which alone gives meaning to what they read.

List includes: Juno, Sir Galahad, Blarney Stone, apple of discord, "Don't give up the ship," "Close, but no cigar," éminence grise, golden parachute, Fabian tactics, ergo, NIMBY, Eucharist, François Rabelais, Tomas de Torquemada, yarmulke, personal pronoun, Count Basie, W.C. Fields, Walter Lippmann, Foggy Bottom…
What does “Literacy” entail?

“Literacy” becomes a way of claiming status for a subject or body of material as a “basic” form of knowledge, necessary to economic growth, personal well-being and the health of public discourse.

Implies modularity of “basic knowledge” -- Cf Hirsch’s list.

Invests subject with civic importance -- what students “must know” for reasons of:

- Personal development/advancement
- General social & economic welfare
- Health of public discourse
The Advent of Computer Literacy

Computer literacy will be as essential in the 1980s and '90s as the three R's were 100 years ago, say educators and specialists in the field. Most people will need some combination of these elements:

* Problem-solving skills used in writing algorithms [calculations] or computer programs.

* Knowledge of how computers can be used in business, medicine, government, science, and other fields.

* Some familiarity with the parts of a computer -- hardware, software, and systems.

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) insists: "A computer literacy course, familiarizing the student with the role and impact of the computer, should be a part of the general education of every student.”

*Christian Science Monitor*, 1980
Why is Information Literacy Important?

“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship”
(ACRL Report)

Information literacy… is a means of personal empowerment. It allows people to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth.

…There is ample evidence that those who learn now to achieve access to the bath of knowledge that already envelops the world will be the future's aristocrats of achievement, and that they will be far more numerous than any aristocracy in history.

Every day lack of timely and accurate information is costly to American businesses.
“The Importance of Information Literacy to Individuals, Business, and Citizenship” (ACRL Report)

It is unfortunate that the very people who most need the empowerment inherent in being information literate are the least likely to have learning experiences which will promote these abilities. Minority and at-risk students, illiterate adults, people with English as a second language, and economically disadvantaged people are among those most likely to lack access to the information that can improve their situations.

To say that information literacy is crucial to effective citizenship is simply to say it is central to the practice of democracy. Any society committed to individual freedom and democratic government must ensure the free flow of information to all its citizens in order to protect personal liberties and to guard its future.
Why is Information Literacy Different from “Literacy” in the old sense

Range of tasks achieved via computers
Range of population requiring skills, thanks to disintermediation
Diminishing role of libraries, publishers, other filters...
"Information Literacy" Defined (ACRL)

Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning. It is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education. It enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning. An information literate individual is able to:

• Determine the extent of information needed
• Access the needed information effectively and efficiently
• Evaluate information and its sources critically
• Incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base
• Use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose
• Understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally
Evaluating Web Pages

http://www.lesley.edu/library/guides/research/evaluating_web.html#purpose

Purpose
  E.g., commercial, educational, etc. (domain suffixes)

Authority
  Author, credentials, sponsorship, authenticity, etc.

Objectivity

Appropriateness

Currency

Responsibility

Clarity

Accessibility
How Do People Evaluate a Web Site’s Credibility? (Fogg et al. 2002)

What strategies do people actually apply in evaluating Web sites?

Subjects evaluated credibility of sites dealing with E-Commerce, Entertainment, Finance, Health, Opinion/Review, etc. at www.mostcredible.org
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)
Factors Determining Website Credibility (Fogg et al. 2002)
Factors Determining Website Credibility
(Fogg et al. 2002)

Percent (of 2,440 comments)

1. 46.1% Design Look
2. 28.5% Information Design/Structure
3. 25.1% Information Focus
4. 15.5% Company Motive
5. 14.8% Information Usefulness
6. 14.3% Information Accuracy
7. 14.1% Name Recognition and Reputation
8. 13.8% Advertising
9. 11.6% Information Bias
10. 9.0% Writing Tone
11. 8.8% Identity of Site Operator
12. 8.6% Site Functionality
13. 6.4% Customer Service
14. 4.6% Past Experience with Site
15. 3.7% Information Clarity
16. 3.6% Performance on Test by User
17. 3.6% Readability
18. 3.4% Affiliations
Variation in Criteria of Evaluation: The importance of cognitive shortcuts

![Percentage of Comments Related to Design Look](chart.png)
Variation in Criteria of Evaluation: The importance of cognitive shortcuts

![Bar Chart: Percentage of Comments Related to Information Design/Structure]

- Search Engines: 42.6%
- Finance: 33.0%
- Travel: 31.8%
- News: 30.2%
- All Sites: 28.5%
- Health: 28.3%
- E-Commerce: 26.5%
- Entertainment: 25.8%
- Opinion or Review: 24.3%
- Sports: 22.3%
- Nonprofit: 18.2%
Variation in Criteria of Evaluation: The importance of cognitive shortcuts
Future Prospects

What should "information literacy" consist of? How should it be taught, and by whom?
What Place for HOI?

On Determinism
Writing Systems/The Effects of Writing
Manuscript Cultures
Storing and Retrieving
  Libraries & archives, paper & the codex, organization…
Print & Print Culture
Book Writing & Wall Writing
18th c. Public Sphere
  Early newspaper, coffee houses, political discourse
Science, Statistics, Certainty
Forms of authority
  reference books, museums, libraries

Information Work
Dawn of the Information Economy 19th century public sphere: mass communication
Time & Space -- Point-to-Point
Propaganda
Office Automation
Post Office
Broadcast
Advertising & branding
Intellectual Property -- owning information
Internet -- background & consequences
Open Source
Information Literacy
Some questions about the Course

Did an overall theme emerge
Areas & topics that could be beefed up? Deemphasized?
More/less stress on technology? Social background? Modern period?
Readings? More discussion? More student involvement?
In-class exercises?