ABSTRACT

            Defining literacy is a compelling challenge to
educators. They generally use three models: instrumental, functional,
and empowerment. The latter two approaches, which were increasingly
evident in the 1980s, identify literacy by the social functions
required in a given context or by the qualities needed for illiterate
people to take control of their lives. A functional definition of
literacy is particularly suited to adult education in the United
States for the following reasons: (1) a functional approach is
capable of encompassing all of the various roles adult education
encompasses; (2) self-improvement as an end in itself pervades adult
education; (3) development of the individual is integral to a
democratic society; and (4) adult education is a creation of the
middle classes, which are most likely to embrace a vision of
education as a means to upward mobility. The argument for literacy as
a means of social and political empowerment reflects the tendency of
adult educators to embrace educational objectives from the humanist,
radical, and socialist continuum. However, although adult educators
espouse literacy for empowerment, they have not been able to
translate this mission into an operational definition. A functional
approach leads inevitably to programs that teach students to fill out
employment applications, read road signs, plan menus, and avoid
poisonous substances provided they are so labeled. This approach
channels resources into the lowest strata of illiterate subcultures
because that is all it can do. The concept of empowerment is
subjective: one person's empowerment is another person's impediment.
The most educators can hope for is consensus on principle because a
unified operational approach is not possible in a pluralistic
society. Even if everyone agreed immediately on a definition of
literacy, it would not begin to make a significant impact upon the
problem of illiteracy in the world today. (The document includes 13
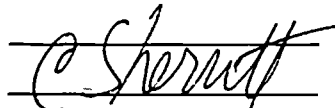references.) (CML)

ON DEFINING LITERACY

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Abstract

Literacy is an elusive concept, yet educators keep trying to define
it. Most definitions fall within three categories: instrumental,
functional, and empowerment. The latter two approaches are
increasingly evident in the 80s and identify literacy by the social
functions required in a given context, or by the qualities needed
for illiterates to take control of their lives.

This paper examines the definition arguments and suggests that
defining literacy and illiteracy is a compelling intellectual
exercise. However, if tomorrow everyone agreed that literacy is
a property of *concrete skills*, *social functions*, or *empowerment*, it
wouldn't make a dent in the wall of illiteracy facing civilized
nations today.

ON DEFINING LITERACY

Literacy is an elusive notion. Defining it is a compelling challenge to educators who generally use three models. The first is instrumental, such as the ability to read a newspaper; the second is social, such as possession of functions deemed necessary for survival; the third is philosophic, such as the capacity for critical thinking and social action (praxis). Growing evidence implies that defining and teaching reading as a utilitarian, discrete function has failed. A National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) warns that our nation is at risk. There is emerging consensus that whatever American teachers have been doing about reading is not working. This inspires educators to seek alternative approaches. Two approaches most often touted by adult educators, and increasingly by child pedagogues as well, are the functional and empowerment paradigms.

What is literacy?

To World Bank policy makers, literacy is the capacity to read and write a simple letter. To census takers in many parts of the world, adult literacy is a positive response on a form which asks, "Can you read and write?" In the United States, literacy is officially equated with years completed in school. Through an abstruse mathematical formulation, the U.S. Census Bureau determined that 99.5 percent of adults in the United States were literate in 1980 (Kozol, 1985). Actual numbers of illiterates in the U.S. range from 20 to 80 million adults, depending on how

literacy is defined. According to Kozol (1985), illiteracy is highest among blacks and Hispanics. He reports that 16 percent of whites, 44 percent of blacks, and 56 percent of Hispanics are functionally illiterate (4). A high rate of illiteracy among some minorities and ethnic groups illustrates a salient phenomenon.

Illiterates of the world come from informal and unorganized sectors of society (Miller and Shapiro, 1979). Since illiteracy relates to class structure, unemployment, nutrition, dependency, and a host of other socio-economic factors, it is frequently viewed within the context of social action. This perspective supports both functional and empowerment definitions. The former identifies literacy with skills needed to fulfill self-determined objectives; the latter views literacy as a vehicle for social transformation. There is a trend to equate literacy with knowledge required to meet various societal demands. Thus, new concepts, such as "computer literacy" and "cultural literacy," are emerging in the culture.

Functional Approach

Many scholars argue for a relativistic perspective of literacy. Hunter and Harmon (1979), for example, delineate characteristics of "conventional" versus "functional" literacy (77). Kozol (1985) distinguishes between illiterates who have no reading ability whatever and semi-literates who have minimal but insufficient skills. Despite different semantic orientations, adult educators tend to adopt a functional approach, describing literacy relative to the adult's capacity to function in society (Cervero: 1985). This trend was enhanced in 1978 when the U.S.

Adult Education Act defined funding guidelines not only in terms of schooling completed, but also in possession of skills needed to be productive. In addition, the Adult Performance Level study (APL) identified functional competencies necessary for life success (Northcutt, et al: 1975). Although viewed with skepticism by some, the APL standards represented a breakthrough in an effort to define an elusive area (Kozol, 9). It was quickly adopted for use by the U.S. Office of Education. Cervero (1985) wrote that "...with few exceptions, there is general agreement with the principle that literacy should be defined as the ability of individuals to function within a specific context" (51).

A functional definition of literacy is particularly suited to American adult education for several reasons.

> First, a relative (functional) approach permits fluid interpretation, capable of encompassing all of the various roles adult education encompasses.
>
> (Cervero,1985)
>
> Second, self-improvement or self-fulfillment as an end in itself pervades American adult education.
>
> (Lloyd, 1972)
>
> Third, development of the individual is integral to a democratic society.
>
> Fourth, adult education is a creation of the middle classes (Brookfield, 1986), most likely to embrace a vision of education as a means to upward mobility.

Adult basic education curricula strive to help people navigate social systems and rarely seek to facilitate critical faculties. Lloyd (1972) suggests that ABE seldom includes developing critical attitudes about pervasive unemployment and illiteracy (51).

Literacy for Empowerment

A body of literature has emerged reflecting the ethos of education for transformation. Like Brookfield (1986), transformationists view literacy as a "means of social and political empowerment, as much as a development of instrumental skills" (170). Long (1986), Fingeret (1983), and Brown (1978), along with some whole-language enthusiasts, argue that literacy education must reflect the social and economic exigencies of learners. Long (1986) posits: "...literacy becomes part education program, part social and economic program, and part integration of these forces in a total community education effort" (108).

The argument for literacy as a medium of empowerment reflects the tendency of adult educators to embrace educational objectives from the humanist and radical/ Socialis; end of the philosophic continuum (Sherritt, 1988). It also points to the influence of radical educators, such as Paulo Freire, who view reading as the medium by which people understand and transform their worlds through praxis, or social action.

Cervero (1985) suggests that while adult educators espouse literacy for empowerment, they cannot translate this mission into an operational definition. It will not, for example, provide a basis from which to set goals, specify content, or evaluate

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progress. Cervero concludes that a common definition may be possible but that a common operational definition is not (51).

Problems With Functional and Empowerment Models

The functional and empowerment approaches to literacy are problematic. Literacy defined as the skills necessary for social adjustment implies infinite functional possibilities and does little to focus an already ambiguous area. While it may be possible to identify basic reading competencies for minimal survival in a given society, it is not possible to classify the competencies needed by every adult in every situation in every place in time and space.

A functional approach toward curriculum leads inevitably to adult basic education and literacy programs which teach students to fill out employment applications, read road signs, plan menus, and avoid poisonous and dangerous substances (provided they are labeled). This creates a situation faced by adult educators the world over and discussed by Mbonde (1975). In his conception, unwitting illiterates are roped into literacy classes and subjected to dubious instruction, often by poorly trained, though well-meaning tutors. If the learners hang around for a while, program administrators "thank their lucky stars" and declare that they have done their part toward eliminating debilitating illiteracy (46).

A functional approach does little to assist the minimally competent individual who would like to become, say, a marketing executive, or a flight engineer, or simply a well-informed citizen. It channels resources into the lowest strata of illiterate sub-

cultures because that is all it can do. It may be remotely possible, but is not feasible, to plan programs which cover every possible life role. Rather, one would need to ask whether there might be generic skills which cut across most predictable situations. This creates two avenues: educating people to 1) acquire basic life survival skills and/or 2) basic reading skills. The former tends to track people into roles which society defines a priori. The latter is what educators have done since the advent of written language; its failure is the genesis of a functional approach.

The empowerment model provides an attitude or ethos in which to advance literacy initiatives, but does little to help the struggling literacy educator and learner. In fact, as Kozol (1985), among others, points out, literacy campaigns within this and other cultures may be programmed failures. Kozol writes:

> The ultimate obstacle is not one of technique but of political and ethical restraint. ... The word "oppression" does not appear in government reports nor in the voices of the people who control major literacy programs in this nation. They have no inclination to use angry language of this kind. ... They are afraid they would lose government funds or forfeit the philanthropy that they depend on.
>
> (48)

If literacy could be defined within a paradigm of empowerment, there is little reason to think that it would translate into an operational definition in this or any other culture, largely

because it is philosophic and political and scares people. In addition, the concept of "empowerment" is subjective. One individual's empowerment is another individual's impediment. An empowerment model does, however, provide fodder for clever intellectual and academic arguments.

Ambiguities surrounding literacy for empowerment should not inhibit educators from seeking a definition which respects the birthright of individuals to control their own destinies. On the other hand, literacy educators must clarify their theories regarding functions and empowerment.

Why Define Literacy?

Defining literacy is fraught with problems, so why try? The most liberated educational program needs some structure and legitimacy. It's difficult to plan for, teach, and evaluate a property that has no definition. Therein lies the biggest obstacle to successful literacy education: LITERACY DEFIES DEFINITION. It is immensely complex. If we don't know what it is or what it can do, we can hardly be expected to teach it with any efficacy, or instill in illiterates a burning desire to acquire it. This ambiguity pervades literacy theory and practice.

Conclusion

Any attempt to define literacy generates more questions than answers. However, two trends emerge in adult education.

> First, adult educators are inclined to support a functional approach which includes basic skills plus life coping mechanisms.

> Second, a new generation of adult educators is supporting literacy for empowerment (social transformation).

If Cervero (1985) is correct, the most educators can hope for is consensus on principle; a unified operational approach is not possible in a pluralistic society.

Defining literacy is a mostly enjoyable, slightly medieval (How many angels can fit on the head of a pin?), largely academic debate of high philosophical abstraction. Inspired by the gravity of the subject, encouraged by a public mandate, and genuinely concerned for quality of life, educators attempt to set parameters on the elusive qualities of being literate. Yet, all of the hoopla attending literacy in the U.S. and abroad has done little to enlighten educators or assist people living in the shadow of the castle wall. In fact, if tomorrow everyone agreed that literacy is a matter of empowerment or functional skills, it would not make a dent in the wall of illiteracy facing civilized nations today.

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