

Notes for Discussion of Literacy as Soc. Capital
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Literacy: a linguistic curiosity

Literacy has become too promiscuous. The word itself, the fragment of language, is daily extending its application. We have more and more literacies. In both popular and learned discourse the term is attached to a proliferating body of conditions and activities. Since the 1980s the term has frequently been applied to competence in computers. Literacy has become not the forerunner of information technology but the gateway to it.... David Vincent, "Literacy Literacy," 2002

The meanings of *literacy*, *literate*, etc.

Basic alphabetism: "literacy campaign"/ "literacy 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" (cf "numeracy"). Blends into "general competence (in some intellectual activity)," as in "media literacy," "information literacy"

Note that only English uses one word for all these concepts:

"literacy campaign"/ "~ rates" = *campagne d'alphabetisation*, *Alphabetisierungskampagne* (or *Lese- und Schreibtest*)

"A literate prose style" = *un style littéraire*/"Il a des lettres"/*uno style colto*...

"The new illiteracy"; "A highly literate person" = *instruit, cultivé*, ("every literate person" = *toute personne de culture, ogni persona colta*)

"economic/geographical/media etc. literacy" (also "numeracy") = *connaissance, conoscenza, Kenntnisse, Bildung*, etc. Cf "la cultura/conoscenza informatica," EDV-*[elektronische datenverarbeitung] Kenntnisse* etc.

"cultural literacy" =???

Invented in US, 1880's; see below

The presuppositions of "literacy"

A public good

A matter of general civic interest & state responsibility

Implies a basic or minimal (and presumably measurable) level of knowledge or competence.

(Contrast "We should require a minimal literacy in/knowledge of history.")

Suggests a threshold value (e.g., in "literacy rates" – contrast ?"knowledge rates")

Implies a universally achievable ability.

Historical Roots

Factors influencing the growth of literacy (Stone)

Social stratification

Job opportunity
Religion
Social control
Demographic patterns
Economic organization
Political institutions
Urban > rural, men > women, Catholic > Protestant

Literacy and education

Complicating "literacy"

Levels of literacy:

Cf Stone's five levels of literacy in pre-industrial Britain

Ability to sign name
Some reading, writing, use of numbers
Account keeping & preparation for professions
Some education in classics
University education

Historians tend to measure literacy as simple "alphabetism" -- why?

"Societal literacy":

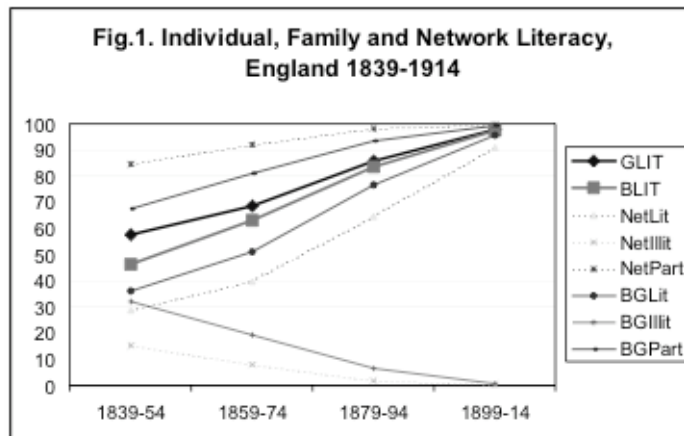
At one point does literacy (or a particular form of it) become a pervasive feature of a society? Relation of soc. literacy to individual literacy.

Group/network literacy. Cf scribes, public letter-writers, *lectores* in cigar factories, etc.

1866: Political Governor of Cuba issues edict making it illegal "to distract the workers of the tobacco shows.... with the reading of books and newspapers, or with discussions foreign to the work in which they are engaged."!



Family literacy



From Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture*, 1993

Modern instances of group literacy: tech support, H & R Block, etc. Family information literacy

Functional Literacy

How did you use your literacy this morning?

Emergence of notion of “functional literacy” after UNESCO report of 1956:

“A person is functionally literate when he 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 often defined in practice as 4th-grade education.”

(term widely misused)

The range of activities requiring "literacy": can it be delineated?

The Consequences of Literacy -- Conflicting views

Literacy as a destabilizing force

Literacy as an instrument of increased political consciousness, which can give people ideas above their station and instill "dangerous doctrines."

[It is not easy] to conceive or invent anything more destructive to the interests and very foundation principles of a nation entirely dependent on its trade and manufactures than this giving an education to children of lower class of her people that will make them contemn those drudgeries for which they were born. 1763, cited by Stone.

Too much education "would make everyone unfit to follow the plough." Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, 1857

"Educate first, agitate afterwards. Ignorance, superstition, and timidity [timorousness] are the weapons which our oppressors have used most effectively in the past. -- *Palladium of Labor*, 1873

Cf rise of the radical press: William Cobbett's *Political Register* in Britain achieves 44,000 weekly circulation in 1816

Literacy as an instrument of social control

"The more [the poor] are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among the ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders." Adam Smith

"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.

"The learning we are to communicate is only intended to enable you to read the scriptures and to see that it is the will of God that you should be contented with your station." Sunday School Tract, 1806

"Reading will help to mend people's morals, but writing is not necessary." Jonas Hanway

"It is not proposed that the children of the poor be taught to write and cypher." Anglican National Society for fostering education.

Organisations use literacy as a proxy for cooperativeness and 'trainability' among recruits. Once such a belief is institutionalised in selection procedures, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and the organisation is never confronted with contradictory instances. Kenneth Levine, *The Social Context of Literacy*, 1986

Shifting conceptions of literacy as a means of social control

Literacy & Black Americans

Following rebellions of Denmark Vesey (Charleston, S. Carolina, 1822) and Nat Turner (Virginia, 1831), many southern states make it illegal to teach blacks to read & write.

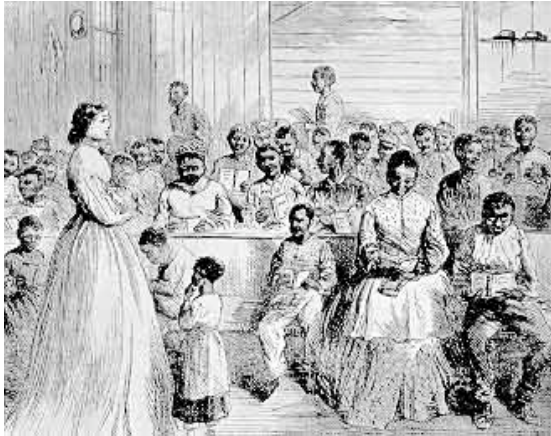
"If you give a n___ an inch, he will take an ell. A n___ should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n___ in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that n___ (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit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

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. ...I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom."
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, 1845

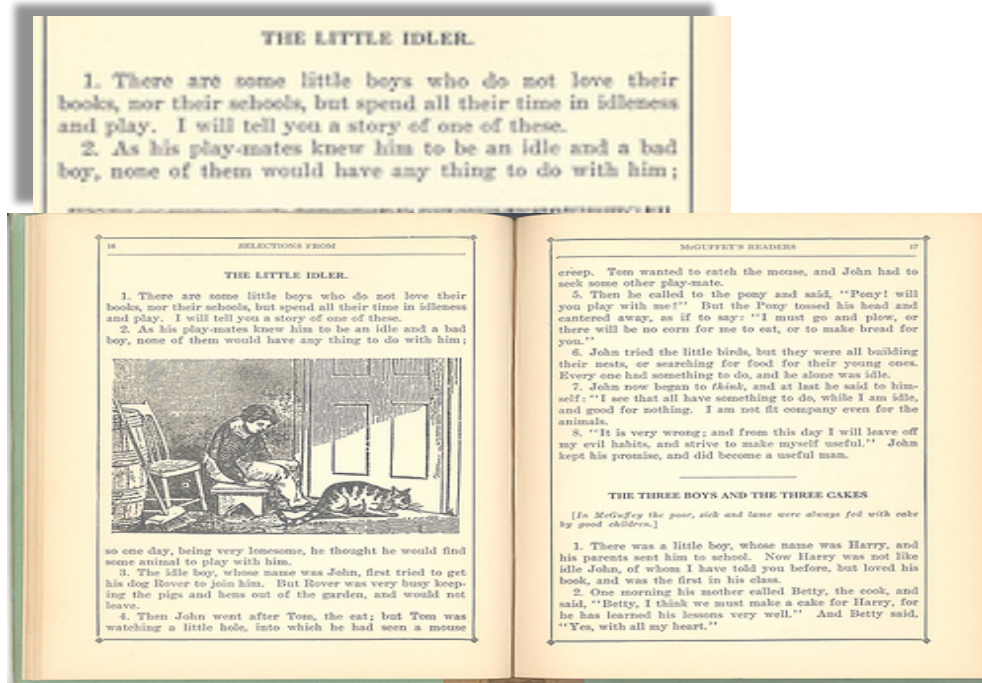
Shift in Reconstruction period

"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. Jrnl. Of Sociology*, 1898

Rise in black literacy after Civil War: from 5-10% to ca. 50% by 1900 60% by 1900 1870



The moral content of literacy instruction



"Literacy" as a public good: late 19th c.

(Coining of "literacy")

Introduction of compulsory universal schooling

Increase in immigration, urban in-migration

Introduction of women into the workforce

Rise of both radical politics and of political parties and "boss" system makes both conservatives and reformers eager to create literate public.

Literacy seen as a source of individual social advancement and societal development.

Literacy rates become an indicator of modernity.

"literacy" first emerges in discussions of census data, voting requirements, race, etc. (*literate* and *illiterate* go back to 17th c., but with different senses.)

Literacy outside of education

The library 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

Libraries as bulwarks against demagoguery, guarantors of democracy.

[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

Concerns about popularity of "immoral fiction" and availability of seditious works

"Go to the nearest Carnegie Library and examine its catalog of books. The chances are five to one that you will find the place full of literary bilge and as bare of good books as a Boston bookshop." H. L. Mencken, 1928

The Economic Value of Literacy

Literacy as a tool for individual social advancement:

"I have known many persons rise to wealth and respectability by their industry, virtues, and self-taught skill; but from their utter want of training in the proper mode of writing, or speaking, or reading their native tongue, they are unable to fill the situations to which their circumstances and talents and characteristics entitle them, and in which they might confer great benefits on society." Eggerton Ryerson, Chief Superintendent of Education for Upper Canada, 1849

But assumptions about literacy and social advancement are not always justified.

"The literate English farm labourer of the late eighteenth century fared no better (and possibly even worse, due to the prejudices of his employer) than his illiterate companion." Laurence Stone

In 19th-c. Canadian cities, "Only rarely was the achievement of literacy [among workers] sufficient to counter the depressing effects of inherited characteristics, of ethnicity, race, and sex. The process of stratification, with its basis in rigid social inequality, ordered the illiterates as it did those who were educated." Harvey Graff, *The Literacy Myth*

Literacy and Economic Development

Low correlation of literacy w/ economic development until 19th c. (cf 18th c. England vs Scotland). No connection seen between literacy/education and economic growth:

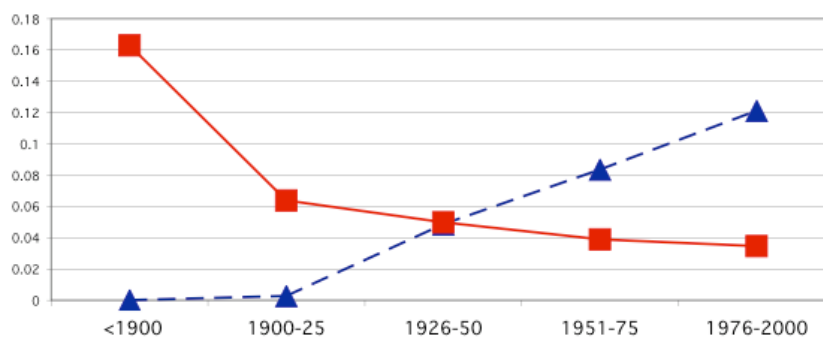
Hardly anyone in early nineteenth-century England cared about popular education for its own sake as a means of the social or economic advancement of the poor, or as a way of developing an unexploited national resource. Laurence Stone

No unprejudiced man can conceal from himself the fact that education has lightened the toil of the laborer and made him more productive." Charles Clarke, 1877

UNESCO is committed to what amounts to a modernization theory to the effect that economic progress follows upon a change in many from illiterate to literate, preferably in one generation, and, even better, in the very same man. (Ian Winchester)

Correlation of literacy rates with indices of industrialization, but "the marginal product of a primary education would seem likely to be low." (David McClelland).

The Triumph of "Literacy": 1900–2000



Frequencies of *literate* and *cultured* in JSTOR Journals in Education and Language and Literature (normalized for corpus size)

Extended meanings of literacy

[Bennington promotes] the development of literacy in all the important aspects of our cultural heritage. This does not mean merely verbal literacy. ... Bennington is attempting the uphill task of including the nonverbal disciplines of art and science, and this involves a great deal of teaching of elementary literacy, neglected at present in the lower schools except in the verbal subjects. "The Bennington Idea," Lewis Webster Jones, *Jrnl. Ed. Soc.*, 1947

"Economic literacy" from 1950. Soon after: geographic, historical literacy, media literacy, etc.

"Cultural literacy" from E. D. Hirsch: "What every American needs to know," "the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world" (1988)

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...

"media literacy" from 1960's: ambiguously; e.g., "media literacy: the right to know" and "competence in diverse media (e.g., film, etc.)," often "multimedia literacy"; also "visual literacy"

"emotional literacy" catches on in late 90's, "physical literacy" used some in UK

Information Literacy

"information literacy" from mid-60's but catches on widely in late 90's:

Table 1. Number of Publications Reviewed 1973–2002

Year	Total	Year	Total
1973	28	1988	149
1974	38	1989	158
1975	49	1990	132
1976	68	1991	195
1977	104	1992	217
1978	132	1993	186
1979	168	1994	164
1980	109	1995	274
1981	144	1996	190
1982	119	1997	195
1983	161	1998	286
1984	239	1999	232
1985	123	2000	237
1986	142	2001 (est.)	310
1987	130	2002 (est.)	330
		Total	5009

Google Scholar reported hits for "information literacy":

1970-74	14
1975-79	32
1980-84	155
1985-89	282
1990-1994	714
1995-1999	2480
2000-2004	8440
2005-2007	8510 (2 years)

Calls for "information literacy" reprise all the arguments made for written-lg literacy, political, social & economic:

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.

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.

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

Modularizing information literacy

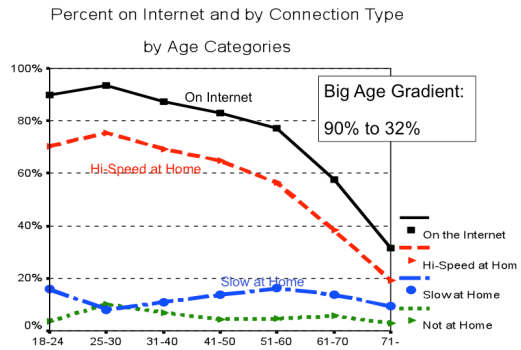
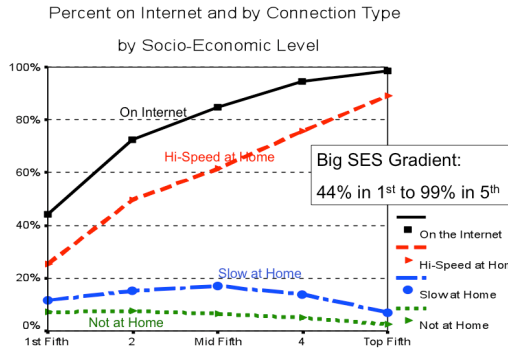
Information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning. It is common to all disciplines, to all learning environments, and to all levels of education. It enables learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning.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

Some questions:

What is the object of information literacy? Information technologies or information?
How many IL's are there. Where does IL stop? And who will bell the cat?

Socioeconomic Disparities & the "Digital Divide"



What do people do with access?

