CHAPTER ONE: THE TERM "LITERACY"

Definitions of Literacy

The way literacy is defined continually evolves. Scholars from different disciplines struggle to define the concept of literacy, but little consensual agreement has been achieved (Soares 1992). The definition of literacy is often subject to past, cultural, economic, political, and other forces. For instance, throughout the Middle Ages, literacy was typically linked with the ability to speak, read, and write Latin; only members of a few elite groups had access to formal education and Latin texts (Soares 1992). By the 16th century, the invention and advancement of printing technology in Europe, and the growing use of languages other than Latin, resulted in an explosion in literacy levels, extending even to people of traditionally lower social classes, such as peasants and merchants (Heath 1996). Literacy was no longer the possession of a few selected groups, but had become a means by which a broad spectrum of people could gain power and status.

In 1951, UNESCO defined literacy as the aptitude of a person who can read and write, and has the ability to write about their daily life. UNESCO later revised this definition in 1978, now referring to the literate person as one who has the ability to participate in all activities in which literacy is necessary for "effective functioning in his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his own and community's development" (Soares 1992). The change in UNESCO's definition reflects an alteration from a narrow set of behaviors in reading and writing to a broader sense of community functions including mathematics. In UNESCO's publication, literacy is viewed from a socio-psycholinguistic viewpoint, one in which literacy constitutes more than the ability to read and write, extending also to the

use of oral and written language as well as other sign systems, such as arithmetic and art, to make sense of the world and converse with others (Berghoff 1998; Harste, Woodward, & Burke 1986; Heath 1984; Halliday 1975).

Other definitions of literacy emerged in 1992 when the National Institute for Literacy Council defined the term as involving the ability to read and write, to use oral and written language in all respects, and to critically and effectively use oral and written language "for all purposes" (National Institute for Literacy Council Report 1992). This definition involves critical thinking about what one reads, as well as expanding the term to encompass oral forms of literacy.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 defines literacy as competence in the ability to read, write, and speak, to "compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job," and to do so in personal and professional situations (National Institute for Literacy, available on line http://novel.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html). This interpretation denotes a broader view of literacy, instead of the more simplified determination of an individual's ability to read, which is the more traditional concept of literacy.

Theorists Dubin and Kuhlman discuss the changing definition of literacy, acknowledging that literacy no longer simply means being able to read and write; the "word literacy itself" is now interpreted as having knowledge, skills, and competence (1992).

Take, for example, common expressions such as "computer literacy," "civic literacy," "health literacy," and a score of other usages in which literacy stands for know-how and awareness of the first word in the expression (Dubin & Kuhlman vi). Dubin

adds to his argument by stating that the past decade has been marked by significant new directions in literacy research brought about by questions which seek to discover how literacy functions in families, communities, and workplaces. He questions the notions of what it means to be "literate" as a member of a particular culture, as well as the patterns of literacy use within fields of work, professions, and age groups (Dubin & Kuhlman vii).

Hiebert takes an explicitly constructivist perspective to the definition of literacy, addressing his views as a "new perspective on literacy" (1). Hiebert acknowledges the emergence of the learning processes through which literacy is acquired (1). This novel perspective does not consist of old ideas with a new name, but rather it represents a profound shift from a text-driven definition of literacy to a view of literacy as an active transformation of texts. In the old view, meaning was assumed to reside primarily within text, whereas, in the new view meaning is created through an interaction of reader and text (1).

Langer takes this notion of interaction of reader with text a step further, contrasting literacy as reading and writing to literacy as a method of thought (13). This author brings up the notion, alluded to in the Workforce Investment Act definition provided above, that the standards for literacy depend on the context within which one functions: "...literacy can be viewed in a broader and educationally more productive way, as the ability to think and reason like a literate person, within a particular society" (Langer 11).

A conceptualized perspective of literacy has emerged in society, as new technologies influence the way we think about literacy. The skills we need to function

effectively have extended past textual reading and writing, and literacy has come to include the skills listed in the above definition. This definition is significant as it looks at literacy from a more contextualized perspective (Langer 11).

Technological literacy, meaning "computer skills and the ability to use computers and other technology to improve learning, productivity, and performance," has become a cultural necessity, seemingly as important as the more conventional skills of writing, reading, and mathematics (Getting America's Students Ready 5). The definition of technological literacy comes from a more expanded connection between literacy and technology (Selfe 1999). This link, related by the way our society thinks and acts, indicates the inevitability for another definition of technological literacy "as a cultural phenomenon, one that includes cultural dimensions" (Selfe 11). Incorporated into this second definition would be literacy "events" and literacy "practices" (Street 1995). By this, Street refers to the manner in which technological literacy is implemented in society, and how we react and use it in our lives. Selfe determines that in the context of the definition above, technological literacy involves:

> social and cultural contexts for discourse and communication, as well as the social and linguistic products and practices of communication and the ways in which electronic communication environments have become essential parts of our cultural understanding of what it means to be literate.

(11)

Technological literacy can be seen as a part of our cultural intellect, made popular by educational theorist E.D. Hirsch, Jr. Hirsch determined that literate people in every culture and society share knowledge, enabling the ability to communicate with each

other, and to understand the world in which they live (1987). The knowledge of a literate person will vary from society to society and from era to era; so there is no absolute definition of literacy. In the early twenty-first century, however, cultural literacy must have a large technological component (Hirsch 1987).

The National Academy of Engineering proposes technological literacy is a much more complicated concept than computer literacy, although the two are often confused (2003). In order to describe the traits of a technologically literate person, it is pertinent to view technological literacy as comprised of three interrelated dimensions. These interdependent components are:

> (1) knowledge; (2) ways of thinking and acting; and (3) capabilities. These dimensions can be placed along a continuum - from low to high, poorly developed to well developed, limited to extensive.
>
> (2003)

Every person possesses a distinctive permutation of knowledge, certain methods of thinking and acting, and faculties that will alter over the course of their life with education and experience. The National Academy of Engineering concludes that the characteristics of a technologically literate person can be described along these dimensions (2003).

While it seems as though the definitions of literacy and technological literacy should be concrete and tangible, this might be difficult due to the rapidity of technological progress. As society continues to evolve with new innovations in myriad technologies, the way we define literacy will change as well. It is important to consider definitions of literacy, for being literate is one determinant of social status. Now, as

technology is developing into an essential facet of our lives, it is also necessary to acknowledge the variety of notions regarding technology - and that these opinions will influence the manner in which we define literacy.

An appropriate example of defining literacy in today's progressively technological era that I contend for comes from the national standards for the English Language Arts, which states:

> ...being literate in contemporary society means being active, critical, and creative users of print and spoken language, as well as the visual language of film and television, commercial and political advertising, and more. It also means being able to use an array of technologies to gather information and communicate with others.
>
> (National Council of Teachers of English / International Reading Association 1996b)

Renee Hobbs concludes this argument for a new definition of literacy. "Literacy," she writes, "is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate messages in a variety of forms" (7).

Although the definitions of literacy noted earlier in this chapter are accurate, the latter pair will remain relevant throughout future technological evolution, as these definitions account for communicating in diverse ways and in a critical manner. Earlier definitions of literacy did not consider societal progress, thus becoming unsuitable to describe literacy relating to technological advancement. Nor did earlier definitions account for the importance of becoming critical – to analyze and evaluate that which is communicated.

When we think critically about literacy, we gain an awareness of the technological culture in which we live and the substantial role literacy plays in determining status in our progressive society. Thus, literacy – and therefore social status – is now determined by more traditional, print-based knowledge as well as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and transmit information using diverse modes of communication.