WHAT IS LITERACY?

An effective definition of literacy is an important starting point for understanding what teaching programs should be implemented. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2006) recognises that definitions of literacy have implications for the classroom:

“[L]iteracy as a concept has proved to be both complex and dynamic, continuing to be interpreted and defined in a multiplicity of ways. People’s notions of what it means to be literate or illiterate are influenced by academic research, institutional agendas, national context, cultural values and personal experiences…[U]nderstandings in the international policy community have expanded too: from viewing literacy as a simple process of acquiring basic cognitive skills, to using these skills in ways that contribute to socio-economic development, to developing the capacity for social awareness and critical reflection as a basis for personal and social change.”

WHAT CAN WE TAKE AS A SUITABLE DEFINITION OF LITERACY FOR THE MODERN WORLD?

The definition of literacy is not static. It changes and evolves to reflect the changing needs of society.

In the past, definitions of literacy focused on only the ability to read and write print texts, but these definitions are no longer enough for the modern world. As Snyder pointed out in *Silicon Literacies*:

“We need an expanded definition which recognises that reading and writing, considered as print-based and logocentric, are only part of what people have to learn to be literate. Now, for the first time in history, the written, oral and audiovisual modalities of communication are integrated into multimodal hypertext systems made accessible via the Internet and the World Wide Web. [2002, p. 3]”

Whatever definition we choose, it must include those facets of literacy as we know it today: not only the basic view of literacy as the ability to read and write but also what are termed social literacy, critical literacy, mathematical literacy, cultural literacy and technological literacy. Essential to all aspects of literacy in Australia, nevertheless, is the ability to read and write in English.
Current views of ‘literacy’ refer to the ways the language-based processes of reading, writing and digital communication are integrated in acts of making and sharing meaning. Literacy is no longer seen as isolated bits of knowledge, such as grammar or spelling, but as the ability to use language purposefully and skilfully in many different situations and for many different purposes.

The literacy definition of Allan Luke and Peter Freebody reflects this changing face of literacy as it is used by individuals to meet a variety of needs within a dynamic society:

Literacy is the flexible and sustainable mastery of a repertoire of practices with texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia (2000, www.readingonline.org/research/lukefreebody.html).

Research on literacy education in school is an activity carried out in the midst of at least five moving targets:

- the changing technologies through which literate communication is used and the reworking of those technologies to re-present the learning and displaying of knowledge.
- The changing pathways that young people face as a result of changes in the workplace environment.
- Changing patterns of learning, including tensions between academic and vocational balances in the school curriculum.
- The changing cultural and linguistic composition of Australian homes and classrooms.
- The changing nature of work organisations, including schools.

Literacy has always been a collection of cultural and communicative practices shared among members of particular groups. As society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possesses a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies. These literacies are multiple, dynamic and malleable. As in the past, they are inextricably linked with particular histories, life possibilities and social trajectories of individuals and groups. Active, successful participants in this 21st-century global society must be able to:

- develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology
- build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought
- design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes
- manage, analyse and synthesise multiple streams of simultaneous information
- create, critique, analyse and evaluate multimedia texts
- attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERACY

Literacy is integral to success in modern society. It pervades almost every area of social interaction including education, work, leisure, communications and business, and is a key
component of the information revolution. Its importance is underlined in the report of the National Inquiry into the Teaching of Literacy:

The contents of this report and the processes leading to its production are grounded in two guiding propositions. First, skilled and knowledgeable young people are Australia’s most valuable resource for the future. Second, teachers are the most valuable resource available to schools. Equipping young people to engage productively in the knowledge economy and in society more broadly is fundamental to both individual and national prosperity, and depends primarily on: the ability to speak, read and write effectively; and the provision of quality teaching. [DEST 2005, Preface]

Competence in literacy is essential if an individual is to participate fully in society—able to take part in the workforce, engage in democratic processes and contribute to society. Literacy is also an essential component of social justice. It enables individuals to gain access to social resources and helps them to participate in social institutions. It can be a source of enjoyment and can contribute to individuals’ widening knowledge and understanding of themselves and the world.

Literacy is crucial to young people’s success at school. Students with effective literacy skills excel not only in English but also in other areas of the curriculum. Students’ overall school performance and their successful transition from one stage of schooling to the next depends on a well-developed foundation of literacy skills and on the positive attitudes to learning that accompany these skills. Students need to have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes and understandings to engage with the literacy demands of the curriculum and to participate effectively in society. Denise Lievesley and Albert Motivans state: ‘Literacy plays an essential role in improving the lives of individuals by enabling economic security and good health, and enriches societies by building human capital, fostering cultural identity and tolerance, and promoting civic participation’ (2002, p. 8).

Most governments throughout the world give a high priority to the development of literacy skills in their populations. As part of basic education, literacy is seen as a key factor in a country’s social and economic development. UNESCO, as part of its education strategy, sees literacy as ‘a fundamental human right’.

The Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, on International Literacy Day (2009) focused on the empowering role of literacy:

Literacy gives people tools with which to improve their livelihoods, participate in community decision-making, gain access to information about health care, and much else besides. Above all, it enables individuals to realize their rights as citizens and human beings.

**LITERACY AS SOCIAL PRACTICE**

We can think of literacy not merely as a single skill, or even a set of skills, but as a way of operating in the world with a variety of texts to get things done and achieve our purposes. Whenever we use literacy we do so in the context of a social practice. We don’t ‘do’ literacy; rather, we engage in social situations of which literacy is an integral part. Literacy is
embedded in the practices of our everyday lives. When we buy a car, do the shopping, visit the doctor or pay a bill, we engage in social practices in which literacy is embedded.

There are culturally accepted ways of engaging in social practices and these can vary across cultures and over time. Greeting people, talking on the phone, sending greeting cards, sending text messages, even shopping, are social practices that vary across cultures and have changed over time. When these practices involve literacy, the forms of literacy also vary from culture to culture and from situation to situation. Out of a need to achieve these social purposes we reach for the skills of literacy.

Teaching children to be literate, therefore, should not be seen merely as providing them with a set of skills to transfer from situation to situation. Rather, it should involve teaching them about how to participate in, understand and gain control of the social practices of their society and the literacy practices that are embedded in them. As James Gee says in his foreword to Lewis’s *Literacy Practices as Social Acts*:

> Literacy-related social practices almost always involve a good many other things besides written language. They almost always include and integrate, along with written language, specific and characteristic ways of talking, acting, interacting, thinking, feeling, valuing, and using various sorts of symbols and tools. Becoming a participant in a specific social practice requires access offered by those already adept at the practice or those who ‘own’ and control it. (Lewis 2001)

Allan Luke and Peter Freebody take this concept further:

> History teaches us that ‘literacy’ refers to a malleable set of cultural practices that are shaped and re-shaped by different, often competing, social and cultural interests. As a result we do not view how to teach literacy as a ‘scientific’ decision, but rather as a moral, political and cultural decision about the kind of literate practices that are needed to enhance people’s agency over their life trajectories and to enhance communities’ intellectual, cultural and semiotic resources in print/multi-mediated economies. Literacy education is ultimately about the kinds of citizens/subjects that could and should be constructed. Teaching and learning isn’t just a matter of skill acquisition and knowledge transmission or natural growth. It’s about building identities and cultures, communities and institutions. And ‘failure’ at literacy isn’t about individual skill deficits—it’s about access and apprenticeship into institutions and resources, discourses and texts. (1995, p. 5)

**LITERACY AND TEXT**

At the centre of an understanding of literacy is the concept of ‘text’. A text is, essentially, any spoken, written, audio or visual communication involving language. Many texts in modern society use varying combinations of all these modes. Whenever we use language to communicate, we either construct a text or interpret a text constructed by someone else. In some instances, such as conversation, we construct and interpret a text simultaneously. We construct or interpret texts as part of engaging in social practices of which the text plays a part. For example, when we go shopping we interact with a range of texts as an integral part of that action: texts such as our shopping list, product labels, price tags, advertising signs or the growing total of our purchases on the checkout computer. And we interpret these
texts in relation to our purpose; for example, ‘How much sugar is in that brand of breakfast cereal?’ ‘Can I afford that coffee?’

When we speak or write we construct texts by making choices from the resources of the language system to achieve our particular social purposes. We decide how to present our texts using oral, written, audio or visual means or a combination of these, depending on our purpose and audience. When we listen or read we create meaning from texts constructed by others by interpreting them within our particular social and cultural context.

The aim of any literacy program, therefore, should be to teach students to construct a wide range of texts, and to interpret a wide range of texts constructed by others within and beyond the social and cultural contexts in which they live.

To do this, students need to understand that:

• different types of texts exist
• texts serve different social purposes
• texts are typically structured in particular ways
• we make choices from the resources of the language system to construct texts to achieve particular social purposes
• we choose how to present our texts depending on our purpose and audience
• we interpret texts constructed by others by understanding how and why particular texts have been constructed
• we use our knowledge of oral, written and audiovisual text structures when we interpret texts constructed by others

LITERACY AND TECHNOLOGY

Literacy has always been closely bound up with technology. From earliest times, people have used technologies such as the clay tablet and papyrus to record ideas and stories, to save information, and to communicate across time and space. Over time, technological inventions such as the printing press, fountain and ballpoint pens, and the telephone prompted huge changes in the ways literacy, as part of social interaction, was practised.

Electronic technologies are part of the long list of technological advances called into the service of literate societies to improve their ability to communicate. But these new electronic technologies have opened the door to a whole new world of communication possibilities. It is important to point out, however, that the literacy practices that have developed alongside the technological inventions have done so because they met the needs of socially grounded communication.

When we make use of the new technologies to engage in information-gathering and communication activities we are using literacy in new ways. When we use a mobile phone and send text messages, surf the Net, send emails or bank and shop online, leave messages on answering machines, or listen to a song on our iPod or MP3, we are using the new technologies to meet our communication needs. New possibilities open up to us new ways
of meeting socially grounded communication needs and these require, inevitably, new knowledge and skills. We need to learn how these new text forms are structured and what conventions apply to their use. We need to learn how these text forms operate in culturally significant ways to empower individuals and groups in society.

As Snyder says:

Central to all these changes is the altering of the landscape of representation and communication. We are in the midst of a shift from an era of mass communication to an era of individuated communication; from unidirectional communication from the centre to the mass, to multidirectional communication from many locations; from the ‘passive’ audience to the ‘interactive’ audience. (2002, p. 179)

And further:

In an electronically mediated world, being literate is to do with understanding how the different modalities are combined in complex ways to create meaning. People have to learn to make sense of the iconic systems evident in computer displays—with all the combination of signs, symbols, pictures, words and sounds. Language is no longer just grammar, lexicon and semantics: language now comprises a wider range of semiotic systems that cut across reading, writing, viewing and speaking. What looks like the same text or multimedia genre on paper or on screen is not functionally the same. It follows different meaning conventions and requires different skills for its successful use. Further, it operates in different social networks for different purposes as part of different human activities. Understanding these multimodal texts requires an interdisciplinary range of methods of analysis: linguistic, semiotic, social, cultural, historical and critical. (p. 3)

We are facing a new world of literacy, a world in which the literacy skills of the paper-based text are no longer enough. Along with traditional literacy skills, we must now include facility with the many multimodal literacy practices that are made possible by the new technologies. No matter what technology is used, however, understanding and using language in appropriate contexts is crucial to the development of literacy.

ONLINE LEARNING

One of the fastest-growing areas of education is online learning. Using the internet, learning programs, tasks and assessments can be undertaken by students in their own time and at their own pace. One significant project in this area is that of the Learning Federation, a consortium of the governments of Australia, the Australian states and territories, and New Zealand. This project employs emerging technologies to produce world-class online curriculum content in a range of curriculum areas, which is freely available for students in all schools.

LITERACY STANDARDS

As research from UNESCO shows, nations around the world are not witnessing a large and visible downturn in literacy standards—on the contrary, levels of literacy, particularly for young people, are rising steadily. However, there are still huge differences in the levels of
literacy between developed and developing countries and, in some countries, between males and females and young and old, and there is still a long way to go before literacy is achieved throughout the world. The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2013) provides the following figures. More than 84 per cent of the world’s population aged 15 years and over is now literate, including more women than ever before. The new estimates and projections show a steady fall in the number of illiterate adults from 22.4 per cent of the world’s population in 1995 to 15.9 per cent in 2011.

It is significant that, in the modern world, literacy demands are increasing and there is now a demand for greater and more sophisticated literacy skills related to the increased variety and complexity in the ways literacy is used. This places schools and teachers in a pivotal position to assist students to attain the levels and varieties of literacy they will need in the 21st century. Education authorities must decide what kinds of literacy practices they will value and promote. This is not a small matter but one of great importance for their students and for society in general.

Since 2000 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has carried out the Programme for International Student Assessment Survey (PISA) every three years. This survey of 15-year-olds is held in many developed countries throughout the world, including Australia, to assist governments to monitor the outcomes of education related to an internationally accepted framework. In 2012 almost 510 000 students in 65 countries participated. After every PISA assessment a National Report is published that provides information about the performance of each country including the performance of particular groups such as males and females and students from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

In setting up the PISA program, *Knowledge and Skills for Life*, the OECD asks:

*Are students well prepared to meet the challenges of the future? Are they able to analyse, reason and communicate their ideas effectively? Do they have the capacity to continue learning throughout life? These are questions that parents, students, the public and those who run education systems continually ask.* (OECD 2001)

The report provides some answers. It assesses how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills that are essential for full participation in society. It presents evidence on student performance in reading, mathematics and scientific literacy, reveals factors that influence the development of these skills at home and at school, and examines the implications for policy development.

The results of PISA tests are used to find the average score for each test and to rank countries according to achievement levels of their students. Increasingly, countries are using the PISA assessments as a measure of their own success on the world stage. In the introduction to the 2012 PISA report, OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurria wrote:

*More and more countries are looking beyond their own borders for evidence of the most successful and efficient policies and practices. Indeed, in a global economy, success is no longer measured against national standards alone, but against the best-performing and most rapidly improving education systems. Over the past decade, the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA, has become the world's premier yardstick for evaluating the quality, equity*
and efficiency of school systems. But the evidence base that PISA has produced goes well beyond statistical benchmarking. By identifying the characteristics of high-performing education systems, PISA allows governments and educators to identify effective policies that they can then adapt to their local contexts.

Detailed results can be found on the OECD website at <www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/pisa-2012-results.htm>. This website allows you to look closely at the data, compare Australian results with those other systems, and even take the 2012 PISA test questions yourself.

The 2012 survey assessed not only what students know and can do but also features of a school and its environment such as equity across the school system, students’ engagement, motivation and drive to learn and the resources, policies and practices that make schools successful. This data will be closely scrutinised by educators in the participating countries and used to formulate policy and practices across their school systems.

LITERACY STANDARDS IN AUSTRALIA

Although successive PISA tests focus on different aspects of literacy, it is possible to identify some trends for Australia.

In the 2012 PISA assessment, which focused on mathematics literacy, Australia achieved significantly higher than the average of countries that participated, although nine of the 65 participating countries achieved higher in reading literacy than Australia. However, as the scores of some countries continue to rise in successive PISA assessments, Australian scores are slipping. From a mean score for reading in 2000 of 528 (OECD average 496) Australia has slipped in 2012 to 512 (OECD average 496). While the 2012 score is still above the OECD average, this drop in average score is concerning.

The Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), in its report on Australia’s performance in PISA 2012 in Reading Literacy, stated that:

• ACT, WA, NSW, VIC and QLD performed significantly higher than the OECD average
• SA performed at about the OECD average
• TAS and NT performed significantly lower than the OECD average
• ACER reported that for Australia in Reading Literacy
  • the mean score for males was 495 and for females 530
  • the mean score for Indigenous students was 425 and for non-Indigenous 515
  • the mean score for students in metropolitan areas was 520, for students in provincial areas 490, and for students in remote areas 452
  • the mean score for students in the highest socioeconomic quartile was 557 and in the lowest quartile 471
  • 9 per cent of males and 14 per cent of females were among the top performers worldwide
  • 18 per cent of males and 9 per cent of females were among the lowest performers worldwide.

These figures show that performance of different groups across Australia is not equal and that some students may not have access to the required levels of teaching and extra learning support programs needed to lift their performance to required levels.

The reasons for the drop in Australia’s performance are not simple. The 2012 PISA report provides extensive data on the policies and practices that contribute to school success. These include:

- how resources, policies and practices are used to create an equitable education system
- how students are selected and grouped at certain education levels
- the allocation of human, material and financial resources throughout a school system and the amount of time dedicated to learning
- the quality of the learning environment that students experience
- assessment and accountability, including school leadership and parental involvement.

It is evident from these detailed reports that this issue is a complex one and that it needs a wide-ranging approach to ensure that the slide in Australia’s results does not continue.

THE WAY FORWARD

What literacy skills will be needed for participation in society in the next decades of the 21st century? How will these skills be measured? How will we ensure that all children have access to the most advanced literacy learning? Snyder asserts:

Indeed, it is likely that writing will remain an important medium of communication, probably culturally the most valued form, for some time yet. However, it is also likely that writing will become increasingly the medium used by and for the power elites of society. Issues of equal access to power and its use make it essential to ensure that all students have the opportunity to achieve the highest level of competence in this mode: print and writing must not be sidelined. But students require the opportunity to achieve the highest competence in all the varied modes of communication now available. It is not an either or: the challenge is to create pedagogical and curriculum frameworks in literacy education that are suitable for present conditions but that are also attuned to the multiple communication possibilities that an uncertain future might yield. (2002, p. 174)

THE WAY FORWARD IN AUSTRALIA

What do we need to do to ensure Australian students achieve higher literacy standards and regain the place they once held in international tests?

Many reports and opinion pieces in the media have tried to provide quick-fix solutions, but by looking at the evidence, it is clear that the solution lies in a multifaceted approach.

Gonski panelist and world-renowned educator Dr Ken Boston’s article in *The Australian* of 16 February 2013 titled ‘School results tell the story: the funding model has failed’ argues that lifting the performance of Australian students will require extra funding and resources
allocated to schools serving students who need extra support to perform at the same level as their peers. He adds:

> Across the world, there is a positive correlation between socioeconomic disadvantage and educational performance: in Australia, socioeconomic disadvantage has a greater adverse effect on educational achievement than in any other comparable OECD country.

The Australian Government’s Department of Education, in its National Partnership for Teacher Quality Project 2012–2013 states: ‘Evidence shows that quality teaching can overcome location and other disadvantages and is the single greatest in-school influence on student engagement and achievement.’ And Preschools NSW in its wide-ranging review into school readiness found:

> There is consistent international evidence that children who have participated in high-quality preschool education programs gain significant long-term benefits from what has been termed the ‘preschool advantage’ (Farrar, et al, 2007). While the evidence indicates that all children benefit from high quality preschool education, the gains are greatest for children from disadvantaged family backgrounds (Cunha, et al, 2006; Sylva, et al, 2004).

In addition, national and international testing programs show that Australian students who achieve levels of literacy below those of their same-age peers are most likely to be:

- students of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent
- students from low socioeconomic backgrounds
- students who speak English as a second language or dialect
- students in regional and remote areas and
- students with disabilities.

Therefore, education authorities at national, state and territory levels need to recognise that improvement in overall literacy levels for Australia as a whole requires a targeted, multifaceted approach that addresses a range of factors if it is to be successful. These factors should include the following components.

**IMPLEMENTATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN CURRICULUM**

The Australian Curriculum for English, approved for introduction into all schools in Australia, provides a balanced approach to the teaching of literacy. Its aim is to improve the quality, equity and transparency of the school curriculum and to provide every student with a world-class education by setting out the knowledge, understanding and skills that are taught in each year level and by setting common standards of achievement across the country. For each year level, it provides clear statements of what students should be taught (Content descriptions) and what counts as acceptable achievement (Achievement standards).

Using this information, teachers can design and implement programs that focus on the needs of their students and the standards that they should be aiming for. This allows
teachers to identify what to teach to help their students reach these standards. Online work samples at each year level on the Australian Curriculum website show teachers what the standards look like for each year level.

As well as the curriculum for English, the Australian curriculum provides information about how to teach literacy as a General Capability, that is, as a key component of all learning areas. It shows teachers how to teach students the language and literacy demands of each learning area including, for example, the types of text a subject such as history might use and the specialist vocabulary a subject such as science might require.

Information about the Australian Curriculum for English and about Literacy as a General Capability can be found on the Australian Curriculum website: <www.australiancurriculum.edu.au>.

Note: in this book we are using the Australian Curriculum’s term ‘Foundation’ for the first year of primary school; ‘Kindergarten’ and ‘Prep’ are used in some Australian states but the Curriculum’s term is used here.

EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING LITERACY

Teachers should be supported to provide excellence in classroom teaching and learning. Research indicates that teachers who have detailed knowledge about literacy and how it is learnt, and have strong teaching programs based on accurate assessment of their students, achieve better learning outcomes for their students. This includes:

• how to use assessment to identify students’ needs
• knowledge about language, how it works and how it is learnt
• how to implement a balanced reading program
• how to use quality literature
• the components of a good writing program and, importantly
• how to assess and teach students experiencing literacy difficulties.

This teaching excellence can be achieved through:

• attracting and retaining the best graduates into a career in teaching
• attention to quality literacy teaching in university courses
• provision of ongoing professional development for in-service teachers.

In particular, ongoing professional learning opportunities are essential if teachers are to improve the effectiveness of their teaching, especially for students with difficulties in learning to read and write in ways that are effective for the 21st century.

FOCUS ON STUDENTS WHO NEED EXTRA SUPPORT

Some students need extra support to reach the levels of achievement of their peers. These students should be assisted to improve and to catch up to their peers.