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## ABSTRACT

Democracy in western countries now depends on literacy at every level: censuses by which governments can plan for the future; elections which are the cornerstone of democratic choice; local meetings which have agendas and minutes--the whole apparatus of social living is organized and recorded through literacy. This paper is concerned with how literacy as a concept has grown over its history. The paper points out that although it seemed recently that computers might do away with much traditional literacy and numeracy, the reality is quite different--more skills, particularly literacy skills, are needed if individuals are to make full use of computers. It notes recent real setbacks to technological progress in communications--Sweden has announced a drop in the income of electronic publishers, many "dot.com" companies have collapsed, and the next generation of mobile phones has not attracted enough interest in, for example, surfing the Net on a mobile. As to government, the paper sees as one of the problems of contemporary administration that individuals live in a regulatory era with multiple levels of government and subsidiary, in which many of the issues are relatively technical, leading to oversimplification. It asks: So what is the function and value of literacy in such a setting? It cites Britain's newly formed Department of Education and Skills which aims to educate for democracy. The paper considers diverse issues regarding the growth of literacy throughout the western world, including enlarging literacy to take in imaginative literature, and the future of the book and the e-book. (NKA)

# Levels of Literacy.

by Keith Nettle

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***Levels of Literacy***

I begin with a quote from the distinguished Central American educationalist Emilia Ferreiro, who enthused an international conference of publishers in Buenos Aires last year by the force and urgency of her message, linking literacy and democracy:

‘Democracy, that form of government that we are all staking our hopes on, demands, needs and requires literate individuals. Full democracy is impossible without levels of literacy that surpass the minimum of spelling and signing. It is impossible to continue to support democracy without making the necessary efforts to increase the number of readers – complete readers, not spellers.’ (1)

Perhaps the limited democracy practised in ancient Athens could work in a largely oral way, though educated people were certainly literate. But democracy now in western countries depends on literacy at every level: censuses by which governments can plan for the future; elections which are the cornerstone of democratic choice; local meetings which have agendas and minutes – the whole apparatus of social living is organised and recorded through literacy.

At one stage a generation ago, it seemed to some that computers might do away with much traditional literacy and numeracy, bypassing language altogether in many contexts, and number crunching all the sums. But the reality was quite different. Computers clearly carry out a great range of activities previously controlled manually: whole industries have been transformed or even replaced. Politics have been transformed also, as the great masses of industrial workers most of whom once voted for one party have been replaced by white collar workers or skilled operatives whose political attitudes may be much more varied. In Britain there are now 7 million

members of trade unions, of whom for the first time over 50 per cent are white collar workers. (The total compares with 12 million workers, mainly blue collar, in 1980). Political parties in many countries have had to change to take account of voter apathy, individuality and consumer choice.

But if banks of computers can run whole industrial processes, it is the PC in the home or school which has had the greatest social effect on individuals. Whereas forecasters twenty years ago thought personal computers would take over tasks from people, reducing their linguistic and mathematical skills, almost the reverse has in fact happened. This is partly because of the enormous growth of emailing, with millions of messages now crossing the world each day. Emailing obviously demands good reading and writing skills to be carried on effectively and fast. Another aspect of PCs is the vast amount of material available for reference, but demanding high literacy skills to access and use. All kinds of choices have to be made, beginning with which search engine to use, and continuing with the most economical way to restrict the huge number of items generally thrown up by a simple word, and the most effective way to make use of hot words and other organisational devices of the Internet. Emilia Ferreiro expressed this graphically when she said that ‘Internet navigators are merely ships adrift if they do not know how to take quick decisions and select information.’

The early predictions mistook the developing course of electronic communication. The supposition that fewer skills would be needed as computers developed turned out to be completely wrong: more skills, particularly literacy skills, are needed if individuals are to make the fullest use of PCs. There was also a mistaken belief that content – electronically published content – would develop much quicker than it has, rather than personal emailing, whose rapid progress was not so widely predicted. While electronic publishing has been strong in some areas – encyclopaedias, for example – it has hardly shifted consumer publishing (the mass market) away from book format. This is despite enormous research and experimentation by Microsoft and other big firms who have consistently predicted the death of the book.

The e-book development has been long and hard. It started on the PC screen, until it became apparent that readers from Umberto Eco downwards strongly disliked reading extensively from a computer screen. Hand-held devices were tried, each one getting

closer and closer to the size and style of the traditional paper book. The e-books now available represent the closest possible approximation to the book, but they seem to be unattractive to most readers. There seems something about the traditional codex that readers prefer, and the convenience of having many works available in one e-book seems at present unattractive to readers of fiction and general books. Perhaps there is something unchangingly satisfying about reading one novel at a time, being completely caught up in it, and not wanting to think about other novels at the same time. In the future, e-books will probably take their place alongside paper books, bringing the added convenience of taking just one device on holiday, in place of five or six books; but they now seem unlikely to replace paper books over the foreseeable future.

There seems over the past year, in fact, to have been the first real setback to technological progress in communications. Sweden has announced a drop in the income of electronic publishers. The dot.com companies have collapsed. The next generation of mobile phones have not attracted enough interest in, for example, surfing the Net on a mobile. A recent survey by the UK Publishers association has shown that learning from books is more effective than learning from multimedia screens. These are perhaps setbacks in the general progress of the electronic medium. But at a recent conference on the e-book, at the Stationers Hall in London, Mark McCallum of Random House made the intelligent comment that 'just because technology can produce something, it won't necessarily have a market'. The paper book was an invention that the market wanted, and continues to want 500 years later. The e-book has not yet convinced the market that it is needed or wanted. Cliff Morgan of John Wiley, an international publisher with a big scientific list, said that electronic publishing represents less than 1 per cent of the company's revenue. Wiley publishes electronically, like most publishers, in order to have a foot in the door, and to ensure that, if and when there is a substantial shift from books to electronic publishing, they, rather than other sorts of suppliers, will still be exploiting their copyrights. Content is now perceived as king, and those who control copyright are in some senses more powerful than those who produce the material on or through which the copyright material is transmitted.

The point about what the market wants brings us back to the Ferreiro quote. Her connection was between literacy and democracy, and we have strayed a little from democracy, though the changes I have noted in social and industrial life are related. In 1946, George Orwell wrote an essay called 'Politics and the English Language'(2), in which he wrote that, in the case of the word *democracy*, 'there is no agreed definition. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of regime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using the word if it were tied down to any one meaning.' The context here was the beginning of the Cold War, the effective ending of which nearly 40 years later also ended that kind of analysis in western countries. For modern western economies, the problem is getting populations to engage with democratic obligations so that governments can justify their actions and remain in office. Orwell deplored the decline of the English language. Modern governments work through language to win votes and sometimes to manage referenda on the constitutional issues of the day.

Ireland's recent referendum on the enlargement of the EC, or Britain's assumed future referendum on the Euro, are examples of the EU's fitful progress towards uniformity of purpose and policies. European government is highly complex, and as it further expands it makes big demands of understanding of the governments and peoples of the member countries. Literacy of a high order is required to cope with most of its newsletters and documents. That is one of the problems of contemporary administration: we live in a regulatory era with multiple levels of government and subsidiarity, in which many of the issues are relatively technical, leading to oversimplification in referenda and elections. So what is the function and value of literacy in such a setting?

Emilia Ferreiro works in South and Central America, where countries are at varying stages of economic development, and where literacy levels are often lower than in Europe or North America. Her comment that those who support democracy must work to create more full readers assumes that context, although advanced economies have problems of their own, which she refers to elsewhere in the paper. She distinguishes 'illiteracy' (in those countries that cannot provide basic education to all children) from the made-up word 'illeteracy' (in countries that provide basic

education for all but where a proportion of the population do not have a taste for reading). In Britain, that section of the school population, often described as 'the long tail of underachievement', probably constitutes about 18 per cent of the total. Such children generally fall outside the Government's targets for level achievement in the National Tests at 8, 11 and 14. The National Literacy Association sees its main role as concern with that sometimes neglected segment of the school population.

This brings us up sharply to the literacy needed for democratic obligations. Traditionally, loyalty to party, whether left or right, was almost automatic for many voters, and neither election literature nor voting forms presented much difficulty. As we have seen, however, we now live in consumer societies where party loyalties are probably not as significant as the statements and perceived qualities of the candidates. Tactical voting also plays a part, even under the first-past-the-post system used in Britain, meaning that people vote for the candidate most likely to win the seat (in order also to keep out the candidate of the party most disliked) rather than the candidate of the party they support and expect to win by an overall majority nationally.

When referenda are called on issues beyond national ones, like the Irish EC one or the potential one on the Euro in Britain, additional problems are raised. These questions are often technical ones where the arguments are complex. How can literacy help here? Obviously the presentation of issues of this kind is important. In Britain for some years it has been possible to submit documents to an agency which can award a 'crystal mark' to written material which meets its standard of readability. So much printed or displayed material is produced by Government, local authorities, schools, commercial companies, advertisers, and so on that some general principles of design have been widely agreed. These include breaking text down into bullet points, using a question-and-answer technique, using active verbs, using straightforward language as opposed to complex or long-winded text, and so on. In school classes, these stylistic and organisational aspects of language are supposed to be taught, as are critical readings of text at the secondary stage.

But issues such as the Euro in Britain are complex in a different sense. In one sense the issue is economic: would Britain be better off if it adopted the Euro? Economists

simply don't agree on this, probably because of the second issue, which is more an emotional matter, or, perhaps, a traditional one. People associate the national currency with the country itself. They feel that something British would be lost along with the pound. Can this sort of issue be meaningfully treated in pre-referendum literature, and in classrooms?

In the 1970s, I was involved in the publishing of the Schools Council Humanities Project, a set of loose-leaf packs of printed material covering a series of social issues of the time, and intended for use by older secondary pupils in general studies classes. The project's director, Lawrence Stenhouse, has been dead for some years, but his name has been memorialised in the US independent publishing house, Stenhouse. The project topics included Housing, Relations between the Sexes, and Race, becoming a social issue in relation to the immigration taking place at that time. In the end, the project foundered owing to the racial issue. The material in the pack, which included illiberal posters and handbills of the time, was thought potentially inflammatory in its loose-leaf form, and so in a sense literacy could not cope with the democratic effort to address contentious issues of the day.

Thirty years later the British Government has tried a different approach. A new curriculum subject, Citizenship, is being introduced next year in all State schools, following a build-up period of several years. In Primary schools, citizenship will be added to the subject called HSE (Health and Social Education), but in Secondary schools it will stand alone as a new timetabled subject. This is a significant development, especially considered alongside the Government's other curricular initiatives, which have been largely concerned with basic literacy and numeracy, first introduced in a systematic way into all State Primary schools, and now being extended into Secondary schools. The aim of the newly formed Department for Education and Skills is to produce a literate and numerate population which is also aware of citizens' rights and obligations – education for democracy. There have been previous attempts to cover citizenship-type content in schools, but the present initiative looks appropriate for this age and more likely to succeed because of the space made for the new subject in the timetable. The difference, compared with the Humanities Project in the 1970s, is that citizenship will not set out to be controversial. On race relations, it will cover the work of the Race Relations Board, and the

characteristics of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century population, and even the issue of racial prejudice on which the Humanities Project foundered. But it will do this without resort to inflammatory material; it will remain dispassionate.

This leaves the question of pupils' feelings of identity and loyalty to their family, group, or wider community, which will still be the subject matter of English, specifically literature. This brings us to a distinction which sooner or later has to be made between literacy and reading, between the vocational and the academic, between politics and life. Literacy as a concept is only about a hundred years old. It came in late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as universal education in western countries was demanding a new type of basic language, which the newly educated could learn as a basis for their work in the large industries or offices of the period. To quote Emilia Ferreiro again,

'During the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it appeared that it was sufficient to "understand simple instructions and to sign". But today, social and labour requirements are far higher and more demanding.' (1)

The higher order literacy skills arise from the changes we have noted in employment and society. They have raised the concept of literacy to the point that bodies such as the IRA and its affiliates now use it regularly in their publications and conferences. This conference, for example, is subtitled 'Diversity in Language and Literacy'. The *Reading Research Quarterly* of IRA describes itself as 'the premier research journal in the literacy field', while UKRA's main journal is now called 'Reading, Literacy and Language'. Britain's curricular programme is called the National Literacy Strategy, though it extends beyond the traditional boundaries of literacy. Even the National Association for the Teaching of English has a 'Language and Literacy' section in its booklist. The question that should concern us is: what are the boundaries of the new literacy? If it demands higher order skills, does it also encompass at least a part of the old subject of 'English', or the range implied by the old term, 'reading'.

We have already partly answered that question affirmatively. In the potential referendum on Britain joining the Euro, we have seen that the issue is complex and will involve emotion as well as reason. If the literacy required to approach that

referendum seriously covers adequately the full range of approaches to the question, it will necessarily range beyond the most limited vocational aspects of traditional literacy. We have seen that within the overall concept of literacy, presentational aspects of text are significant. It is also evident that the new British subject, Citizenship, will demand greater than basic literacy resources as it ranges across the public services and helps children understand the regulatory framework of contemporary life, forging a link between literacy and democracy.

But the distinction between functional and imaginative language remains an important one. It is best defined, in my experience, by the 20th century Swiss child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, in these words from his book, with Karen Zelan, meaningfully entitled *On Learning to Read*:

‘There are two radically different ways in which reading (and the learning of it) can be experienced: either as something of great practical value, important if one wants to get on in life; or as the source of unlimited knowledge and the most moving aesthetic experiences...

Consciously, most of us take pride in our rationality, and are correctly convinced that more than anything else it is our literacy that lifts us out of irrationality into rationality. That an earlier, childish idea of literacy’s magic power may still be at work in us is suggested by what we experience when we are deeply affected by art, poetry, music, literature, for then we feel touched by magic. It is an irrational attraction, but one that continues to move us throughout our entire lives.’

(3)

The mention of magic may be disturbing, but it reminds us that imaginative reading is different from functional reading. It touches deeper parts of our minds and satisfies us in ways that aren’t normally attainable from rational reading. For many educationalists and publishers, the satisfactions of imaginative reading are among the chief benefits of a good education.

Yet is this an outdated view? We live in an information age and computers are particularly good at storing and making available chunks of information. Some do consider that day of reading whole books has largely passed for students. Rather than reading whole books, many students now locate sections, papers, paragraphs even and print these out from the PC, to be organised into an essay. History students who in the past might have read Carr's *What Is History?* (4) are now more likely to use search engines to access chunks of historical information and, through selection and editorial organisation, build up an essay in that way. The view of history conveyed by Carr's book may or may not be the one the chunks of historical information in the student's PC add up to, but the method of studying is certainly different. Is it this method and attitude that is causing the slow change from paper to screen, or is the technology causing the students to change their study habits? The answer is probably that the two developments are proceeding hand in hand. What may be the outcome, however, is the change in many non-fiction texts, from whole paper books to electronic summaries and anthologies.

That great reading advocate George Steiner now says: 'We have a very exciting time ahead, when literature itself will have to re-examine what literacy is.... Who is going to be literate? Who will define basic literacy?' (5)

The point about literature and literacy is highly relevant to my paper. I have already suggested that literacy has expanded to include features we once associated with reading or language: what would be really exciting would be the enlargement of literacy to take in imaginative literature. This would happen if those who write and legislate for literacy programmes in school decide that literature forms part of the birthright of all children, reminiscent of Einstein's assertion that 'imagination is more important than knowledge'. Consideration of racial issues might then include not only the official statistics and programmes but also *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Roll of Thunder*. Government brochures or explanatory leaflets might make literary allusions or extracts alongside the prose arguments.

This possible outcome is not entirely far-fetched. Britain's National Literacy Strategy already includes references to children's books: reading comprehension is provided at each level for fiction and poetry as well as non-fiction. In a sense literacy has been

substituted for most of the language and literature work formerly done in Primary schools. But something is held back. What Bettelheim calls the magic is missing. The gap is the space between the functional/vocational on the one side, and the imaginative/pleasurable on the other. Many educationalists and publishers would like to see children leaving full-time education as readers in the full sense, rather than people who are skilled at sifting and using information. Is this a practicable goal?

In the early 1990s the International Publishers Association, in conjunction with UNESCO, prepared and published a Charter for the Reader (6). In the inevitably generalised way in which such a brief document must work, the Charter covers the essential desiderata of a country which values reading. The Articles cover (1) the right to read; (2) opportunities for reading; (3) support and encouragement for reading; and (4) information and co-operation on reading. A fifth Article reads simply:

‘Books are the spiritual powerhouse of humanity – the resource that can enable humanity to face the future with confidence.

**Books need – books deserve universal interest and support.’**

Since 1992, the development of the PC and the Internet has somewhat modified the simple identification of the book as the object of admiration. Although we have already noted the resilience of the book for fiction and consumer material, in specialist and reference fields information constantly flows around the cyber world and is accessed by those who need the particular class of information. Thus we have a more complicated set of values already. While the book no longer looks likely to die out in the foreseeable future, much material previously published in book form now circulates as part of a data/information flow online, subscribed to by specialists with a need for access. Market forces apply. The distinction now, more than ever before, is between functional reading and pleasure reading.

This brings us back to education, because it is in the early years that children learn to read, and establish the habits that will generally stay with them in adult life. One defence of basic literacy has been the view that reading and writing at a basic level have to be mastered before the learner can go on to more interesting aspects of language. This argument was used a good deal as the British National Literacy

Strategy was introduced a few years ago. In particular it was used to justify the re-introduction into British classrooms of phonics and grammar, after a 20 year gap. It was felt at an official level that all children would gain from this rigour, though there was plenty of evidence that many children would have become fluent readers and able writers without it. The difference was that this time the linguistic teaching was modernised and related to speaking and writing.

But underlying the Literacy Strategy and its admirable aim of raising standards across the school population, lies the continuing issue of imagination and its effective absence from literacy. As Margaret Meek Spencer puts it so well:

‘The story mode of experience is a powerful extension of the actual, making it possible for those who can encompass it to live their lives forward, to anticipate events and go back over experiences they never had. It is this possibility, this dimension of feeling and knowing that differentiates those children who enjoy reading and willingly do it, from those who have never understood what reading is all about.’

(7)

Attempts have been made to show a correlation or connection between voluntary reading and functional reading (sometimes called ‘reading for learning’). In the USA, Keith Stanovich carried out a piece of experimental research in an airport, demonstrating that passengers who were avid readers turned out to be better informed generally than the non-readers also involved in the research. British Library research (8) has shown that children who read voluntarily for pleasure not only perform better when reading for learning, but also cope better with the operations needed when word processing and surfing the Internet. Knowing the organisational systems of the book – contents pages, sections, indexes, etc. – is a help when using parallel systems.

It is more difficult to find research backing for the beneficial effects of leisure reading. The words used in the imaginative context suggest why this may be so. For Bettelheim, ‘magic’ is adduced to explain the aesthetic effect of literature and art; for Margaret Meek Spencer, writes of ‘a dimension of feeling’; the Charter for the Reader used the adjective ‘spiritual’ for the effect of good books. John Ruskin adds to these terms:

'I am, indeed, every day of my yet spared life, more and more grateful that my mind is capable of imaginative vision., and liable to the noble dangers of delusion which separate the speculative intellect of humanity from the dreamless instinct of brutes.'

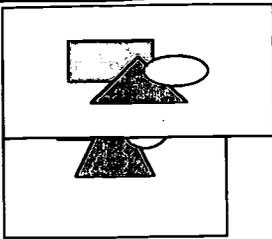
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If imaginative fiction and poetry appeals to a different part of our mind from more functional writing, can we expect it to be part of a literacy system designed for other purposes? Yet young children love stories and rhymes, and contact with books made at an early age is clearly of great benefit to children fortunate enough to experience it. How much educational effort and investment should go to extending the love of stories to as wide a span of the school population as possible?

I have probably implied the answer I would give to this question in everything I have said previously. With education changing its focus towards the individual (increasingly served by electronic resources); with society shifting from monolithic classes to individual consumers; and with imagination valued as never before (for scientific as much as for artistic purposes), the time is ripe for idealism and positive change. I have tried to show how literacy has grown as a concept over its 110 year history. It can grow further, encompassing the quality of imagination which at present it largely lacks.

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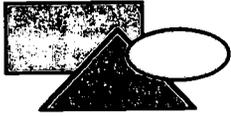
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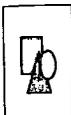
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