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## Literacy in the new millennium

*Michele Lonsdale*

*Doug McCurry*

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# Literacy in the new millennium

*Michele Lonsdale  
Doug McCurry*

*Australian Council for Educational Research*

The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author/project team and do not necessarily reflect the views of ANTA, DEST or NCVER.



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Education,**  
**Science and Training**

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Funded under the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Adult Literacy National Project by the Commonwealth through the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

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ISBN 1 920895 77 9 print edition

1 920895 78 7 web edition

TD/TNC 78.02

Published by NCVER

ABN 87 007 967 311

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# Part 1: An overview

# Overview

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This is an overview of the discussion paper which forms the second part of this report and is designed to encourage discussion on the implications of current understandings of literacy.

## The diverse nature of literacy

Literacy has been defined in many different, sometimes contradictory, ways. Some definitions focus on the skills needed by individuals for work, education, social interaction and negotiation of everyday living. Others have a more social focus, and include the literacies for specific contexts and those which empower particular communities enabling them to challenge the status quo. How literacy is defined shapes the kinds of policies developed and the teaching/learning practices adopted.

The research shows that literacy has no single or universal definition and that its meaning has changed over time from an elementary ‘decoding’ of written information to a range of more complex and diverse skills and understandings.

The United Nations position on literacy, for example, clearly reflects this shift in thinking. In the 1950s the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) declared a person to be functionally literate ‘when he [sic] has acquired the knowledge and skills in reading and writing which enable him to engage effectively in all those activities in which literacy is normally assumed in his culture or group’ (Baker & Street 1994, p.3453). However, by April 2003, at the official launch of the United Nations Literacy Decade 2003–2012, the United Nations spokesperson acknowledged that the campaign was based on a new definition of literacy ‘and the recognition of multiple literacies which are diverse, have many dimensions, and are learned in different ways’ (Shaeffer 2003).

For the United Nations, literacy is no longer defined primarily in terms of individual skills aimed at increasing national productivity, but more in terms of its potential for sustainable literate communities. At the same time however, there is still a focus in the United Nations’ approach on print-based rather than electronic-based literacies, presumably because most of the developing countries being targeted in the current United Nations literacy campaign do not have well-developed communications technology infrastructures.

The then Australian Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs’ definition of literacy in its *Literacy for all* (1998) publication, also grounds literacy in reading and writing print materials, while acknowledging the place of critical thinking and the concept of ‘multiple uses of literacy in society’.

## External factors shaping current thinking about literacy

Changing conceptions of literacy need to be understood against a background of profound economic, social, political, economic and cultural change. Several key factors have helped to shape contemporary understandings of literacy.

- ✧ Developments in technology have dramatically transformed the world. The advent of the internet, email and text messaging, for example, enables communications to be carried out instantaneously across vast distances.
- ✧ One outcome of the technological revolution is the globalisation of national economies. The increasing interdependence of nations brings with it both a greater strength and a greater vulnerability. A country's survival depends more than ever on its capacity to be economically competitive. This means producing citizens with the skills and understandings to be able to maintain a country's productivity and competitive edge.
- ✧ The proliferation of information (print, electronic, audio and visual) requires the ability to order, process and evaluate this information. The nature of this information means that it is quickly obsolete and today's workers need to have the capacity to continually update their skills and understandings.
- ✧ Education is no longer confined to the period of formal schooling but is viewed as a lifelong experience. In the 1950s the workforce was characterised by lifelong careers, usually within the one organisation. Today however, workers may have several different jobs over their lifetime. Workers need to be adaptable, multi-skilled and mobile. In the less hierarchical 'postmodern' workplace, workers are expected to have problem-solving and decision-making skills, be 'team players' and demonstrate initiative.
- ✧ Under the influence of postmodern philosophies, old ways of thinking have been substantially challenged. Language is now seen as arbitrary and indeterminate. Concepts like reality, sexuality, morality and truth are no longer seen in absolute terms but as relative and interrelated. Literacy thus becomes a social construction, rather than an autonomous and universal given.
- ✧ In today's world the previously fixed cultural categories have been dismantled and have been replaced by a diversity of perspectives. For example, multiculturalism replaces monoculturalism, multiple literacies replace the concept of a single literacy. More attention is paid to the experiences of the marginalised and oppressed than in the past. There is a new inclusiveness and diversity is celebrated.
- ✧ As discrete bodies of knowledge are broken down, they are replaced by interdisciplinary studies. Theoretical developments in literacy, for example, have been influenced by the work of anthropologists and linguists, historians and psychologists. Bodies of knowledge are further broken down and viewed in terms of skills and processes that need to be acquired.
- ✧ These wider changes have had an impact on teaching and learning practices. Education has become more student-centred. Knowledge is no longer simply imparted from teacher to pupil; the learner today is actively engaged in constructing his or her own learning. Success is measured in terms of outcomes statements rather than formulated as goals. The focus is less on the digestion of facts and more on 'learning how to learn'.
- ✧ Technological tools enable adult learners to take advantage of more flexible modes of delivery. Learning can take place in 'chunks' or segments, at any time, in the workplace or in a community centre, at home or in a technical and further education (TAFE) institute. Learners can access online resource collections and participate in learning communities.

- ✧ The discrediting of old ways of thinking has encouraged learners to question texts and the prevailing ideologies. Literacy today has a strong critical dimension, whether conceptualised as ‘basic’ reading or writing or as a range of diverse practices.

These wide-reaching cultural changes have inevitably had an impact on the ways in which literacy is perceived and understood. In addition, various ethnographic studies of small communities have highlighted the ways in which literacies function and their relationship to social groupings. The next section looks at some of the ways in which conceptions of literacy have changed over time.

## Changing conceptions of literacy

### Purposes

Conceptions of literacy generally reflect the different purposes that literacy is seen to have. These purposes are commonly expressed in terms of benefits to individuals or benefits to society.

The benefits to individuals are summarised by the following:

- ✧ personal development
- ✧ economic benefits for the individual (such as improved employment opportunities, better income)
- ✧ empowerment of the individual (such as the capacity to question societal norms)
- ✧ social and personal benefits for the individual (such as greater confidence)
- ✧ a tool facilitating access to further learning.

The benefits to society are summarised by the following:

- ✧ economic benefits for the nation (such as increased productivity and competitiveness)
- ✧ the transformation of society (through community capacity-building which effects changes within society)
- ✧ social control in terms of maintaining hierarchies (elite versus ignorant; civilised versus primitive; developing versus developed).

### Individual attributes or social practice?

Perhaps the most influential conceptualisation of literacy is that offered by Brian Street (1984) in which he distinguishes between an ‘autonomous’ model of literacy and an ‘ideological’ model. Most other conceptions are variations on this theme—literacy tends to be viewed either as an individual attribute or a social practice.

### Autonomous model of literacy

The following are the characteristics of the autonomous model of literacy:

- ✧ Literacy is viewed primarily as the expression of a person’s intellectual abilities and various psychological tests are used to determine individual literacy levels.
- ✧ Illiteracy is viewed as a deficit, with the individual held largely responsible for this lack.
- ✧ Literacy is considered separate from its context and is mainly print-based.
- ✧ The underlying purpose of literacy is to imbue into individuals an acceptance of the dominant ideologies and its explicit purpose is to enhance the economic productivity of the nation.

- ✧ This model is aligned with the concept of human capital, in which intellectually trained workers form the backbone of the workforce and knowledge becomes a commodity to be exported to other countries.

In relation to the last point, workers are expected to undergo continual re-skilling to ensure their adaptability to rapidly changing information and technologies and to ensure businesses/industry maintain their competitive edge.

## Ideological models of literacy

The following are the characteristics of the ideological model of literacy:

- ✧ Literacy is viewed as a social practice and as a social responsibility.
- ✧ There are multiple learner-centred literacies involving a diverse range of skills and understandings, including technological and computer literacies.
- ✧ Critical thinking skills play an important role as enabling tools in this conception.
- ✧ Ethnographic approaches are adopted as assessment tools.
- ✧ There is a strong focus on the social context in which literacy practices take place and a consequent shift from narrow vocational outcomes for individual learners to more holistic outcomes related to empowerment and capacity-building for both individuals and communities.

## Other models

Other conceptions categorise types and levels of literacy. Rassool (1999) for example, uses the categories of basic literacy, functional literacy, critical literacy and multiliteracy. Lankshear (1997) identifies four levels of literacy: lingering basics (basic skills necessary for school work), new basics (skills for contributing productively to a capitalist society), elite literacies (higher-order skills where language is used to express abstract and complex principles) and foreign language literacy (skills for operating in a global economy). Luke, Freebody and Land (2000) focus on text in describing their array of capabilities. Literacy for them entails the capacity to decode written text, understand and compose meaningful text, use text functionally and analyse text critically. Others describe literacy in terms of integrated literacies, or their relationship to print and technology.

For Freire (1972) literacy is a set of practices which have the potential either to empower (by enabling critical analysis) or disempower (by merely reinforcing existing unequal relationships within the community) individuals. Freire identifies four approaches to literacy: academic, utilitarian, cognitive development and romantic. In contrast to these approaches, he proposes a literacy which takes into account the individual's life circumstances, language and cultural context. In Freire's approach the 'literate' individual has the capacity to critically analyse the prevailing social and political order, including issues such as poverty. For Freire, literacy is a process of 'conscientisation'—the acquisition of skills and understandings which enable individuals to recognise and challenge the unequal political, social, cultural, economic contexts which govern their lives. This concept of an active and socially active literacy based in the cultural context of the learner is a strong element in current conceptions of literacy.

## New literacies

The literacies considered most relevant to a postmodern era have been identified through the research as the ability:

- ✧ to 'read' a range of print and non-print texts

- ✧ to master the new and evolving technologies and manage information
- ✧ to engage critically with media and other texts.

New literacies to surface in recent times include scientific literacy, ethics literacy, health literacy, computer literacy, financial literacy, environmental literacy and media literacy. Information literacy already has its own substantial body of literature and almost every domain now has its own 'literacy'.

## Multiple literacies

The research on multiple literacies, their characteristics and the ways in which the various literacies intersect with each other, is still relatively new. Of the skills most commonly assumed to be integral to these literacies, reading (in its broadest sense) is mentioned most often. The nature of reading has changed since the 1956 UNESCO definition to mean more than simply an ability to master print-based materials. In its broadest sense it is an act of interpreting the full range of media, whether visual, print-based, electronic-based or spoken.

Perhaps it is more accurate to speak of 'decoding/encoding' as the one element common to all conceptions of literacy, including the multiple versions of today. However, in keeping with current understandings of literacy, decoding/encoding involves more than just the possession of technical skills as has sometimes been presented in the past. Decoding and encoding are also critical tools enabling learners to make sense of and actively engage with their world, thereby increasing their capacity to influence it.

While some writers and theorists locate critical literacy alongside other literacies, implying a separate area with its own language and conventions, critical thinking, as an integral component of decoding, is arguably a generic component of literacy today, underpinning all literacies. The nature of these literacies and their interconnections need further exploration. For example, what constitutes 'critical literacy' and how is it different from information literacy or media literacy? How is social literacy different from generic employability skills? Are there some aspects of literacy that can be considered fundamental to all literacies?

## Implications

Given the emergence of new literacies, and the recognition that literacies are both multiple and context-specific, a review of national literacy frameworks with their strong focus on training and employability outcomes, is urgently needed. The review of literature has also shown that the validity of current economic approaches to literacy is being challenged.

Table 1 highlights our view of some of the implications of current conceptions of literacy for policy-making and teaching/learning.

**Table 1: Current conceptions of literacy for policy-making and teaching/learning**

Aspects of literacy	Implication
Conceptions of literacy have broadened. Literacy is recognised as making meaning (that is, making sense of the world).	Policies which imply or function as though literacy can be defined as a specific set of skills should be critically questioned.
There is no universal definition of literacy.	Policies which imply or function as though there is one primary model of literacy need to be reviewed.
Literacy is context-specific.	There can be many kinds of literacy development which takes place in many different ways. Policies which depend on benchmarking, literacy surveys or testing need to be critically questioned.
Literacy is multiple.	There can be no single or superior method of literacy development. Policies which validate some literacies and not others need to be reviewed.
Literacy is a social practice.	Policies which focus only on individual skilling and not community capacity-building need to be reviewed.
Literacy begins with the needs of the learner.	Policies framed primarily in terms of vocational outcomes need to be critically questioned.
The literacy needs of learners change over time.	Policies and programs which do not actively support lifelong learning need to be reviewed.
Literacy means an ability to critically assess aspects of the learner's world.	Policies need to support teaching/learning practices which enable learners to make meaning of their world.
Literacy has multiple purposes.	One purpose for literacy development must not obstruct other purposes.
There are more or less dominant literacies (for example, a dominant literacy would be associated with learning undertaken at a TAFE college or university, while a less dominant or 'vernacular' literacy is that associated with the after-school teaching by foreign language communities to members of these communities).	One kind of literacy development must not be allowed to obstruct the development of other kinds of literacy.
Literacy is multi-disciplinary.	Policies which imply or function as though literacy is a matter for language teachers rather than for all teachers need to be reviewed.

## Conclusions

Current conceptions of literacy challenge long-standing assumptions about the nature and purpose of literacy and its implementation in an Australian context. A central tension exists between a broader conception of literacy, which defines it as a tool for making meaning, and one which defines it as a set of specific skills. In this context therefore, the key questions for literacy in the new millennium are:

- ✧ How can broad views of literacy be enacted and implemented?
- ✧ How can the new literacies be accommodated in policy and teaching/learning practices?
- ✧ How can they be assessed?

In our view the research highlights the gap that exists between current ways of thinking about literacy and current approaches at state and federal levels. Despite the claim made by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs that it recognised 'the broadening scope and multiple uses of literacy in all spheres of society' (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs 1998, p.7), literacy in Australia is still tied to successful participation in school, further study, training or work. It is underpinned by the assumption that literacy can be readily quantified and that individual literacy levels can be measured against benchmarks at particular year levels. It assumes that literacy is

primarily related to an individual's intellectual ability rather than to the social practices of specific contexts.

Moreover, while acknowledging that a range of literacies exist, current Australian policy and practice favours print-based and workplace literacies. Adult literacy is framed in terms of national economic goals and vocational outcomes, yet, as Mary Hamilton has pointed out, 'the competing policy discourses that may pull adult literacy in different directions', suggest that 'the lifelong learning, active citizenship and social inclusion agendas, if they are creatively and critically understood, offer possibilities for more open definitions of literacy than the human resource model still dominant within initial education' (Hamilton, Macrae & Tett 2001, p.39).

A broad conception of literacy requires a teaching and learning process (including assessment) which is focused on meaning-making. That is, rather than merely reproducing uncritically what they have been taught, learners should be able to make sense of the world and develop their own perspectives. This implies both an understanding of the world and the capacity to critically evaluate that world. If this broader conception of literacy is overlooked, then literacy becomes little more than the mastery of a series of sub-skills, rather than the genuinely transforming experience which current conceptions of literacy—as social practice, critical engagement, context-specific and multiple—suggest it should be.

## Part 2: A discussion paper

# Executive summary

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The world has changed profoundly in the past fifty or so years and, in the process, has challenged many of our long-standing assumptions about literacy and language, to such an extent that a rethinking of what is implied by literacy is urgently needed. How literacy is perceived has implications for policy-makers, practitioners, researchers and students. It has implications for governments, workplaces and institutions, for which aspects of literacy are favoured and supported, which research is funded, how literacy is measured and valued and the teaching and learning approaches adopted. How we define literacy can lead to different conclusions about the extent of illiteracy.

This project involved a literature review and subsequent consultations with a small group of key stakeholders whose different perspectives helped to inform this discussion paper. The main focus of the review was on work published since 1990. The purpose of the review was to identify the issues and changes which have occurred in thinking about literacy and to provide an intellectual platform from which further debate about the nature of literacy today can take place in an Australian context.

This paper examines some of the often contradictory ways in which literacy has been defined before considering how and why literacy conceptions have changed over the years. The final section of the paper outlines a number of implications for literacy policy and practice highlighted by the research.

## What the research found

### A paradigm shift

The literature search identified the diverse nature of literacy as a concept. While it has been most commonly used to denote elementary reading and writing skills, the term 'literacy' has also been used in other ways and for a variety of purposes. The literature makes it very clear that there is no universally accepted definition of literacy and that each definition is a product of a particular, albeit often unacknowledged and unrecognised, world view.

The theoretical developments which have occurred in the field of literacy need to be placed within the broader context of the profound economic, social, political and cultural changes of the past half century. These changes—described variously by theorists in terms of a 'post-industrial society', 'information society', 'information economy', 'knowledge society', 'global village', and so on—are all terms which this paper identifies as being characteristic of the 'postmodern' condition.

In this discussion paper the evolution of conceptions and definitions relating to literacy is explained in terms of a shift from modernity to postmodernity. Modernity and postmodernity are being understood here not as historical periods, but rather as ways of viewing the world. In this context therefore, conceptions and definitions of literacy are products of their cultural times. The consequences of this paradigm shift for literacy and education are substantial.

## Conceptions of literacies

Literacy conceptions today are no longer limited simply to reading and writing. There is a general recognition that changes have so transformed the world in recent years that the concept of literacy needs to encompass a broader range of capabilities than in the past. Perhaps the most influential conceptualisation of literacy is that offered by Brian Street (1984), who distinguishes between an *autonomous* model and an *ideological* model of literacy. The autonomous model, it is being suggested in this discussion paper, is symptomatic of a 'modern' condition typically associated with notions of progress, linear history, logical thought and a psychometric tradition of testing. The ideological model on the other hand, is more closely associated with a 'postmodern' condition—typically characterised by sociocultural practices, attention to context, critical discourse and ethnographic studies.

Based on the research, there appear to be three main conceptions of literacy with currency in Australia today, with implications for policy-making and teaching/learning:

- ✧ a cognitive, individual-based model associated with a psychometric tradition, quantifiable levels of ability, and a deficit approach to 'illiteracy', which is assumed to be both an outcome of individual inadequacy, and a causal factor in unemployment
- ✧ an economics-driven model generally associated with workforce training, multiskilling, productivity, 'functional' literacy and notions of human capital
- ✧ a sociocultural model which is most commonly associated with contextualised and multiple literacy practices, a valuing of the 'other', and a strong critical element.

In general, literacy today is perceived to be social by nature rather than merely an individual's set of skills, and there is consensus among literacy researchers that the meaning of literacy depends on the context in which it is being used.

## Conclusions

The research undertaken in the course of this paper indicates that literacy can no longer be assumed to be either a universal or unitary concept, nor can literacy policy continue to be linked to the demands of a globalised economy and a national training agenda which sees adult literacy primarily in terms of vocational outcomes. In this context therefore, this paper has identified a number of important implications for literacy policy and practice.

### For policy-makers

- ✧ The research indicates the need for a new national policy which recognises the wider changing social, political, economic and cultural contexts and the emergence in recent years of ethnographic studies which challenge long-standing assumptions about literacy.
- ✧ Such a policy needs to be flexible enough to accommodate current and future literacies and to explicitly recognise the place of non-print technologies in any new conception of literacy.
- ✧ In keeping with the United Nations Literacy Decade guidelines and current focus on literacy as social practice, policies need to support community capacity-building and not simply individual skilling.
- ✧ Government policies should reflect the fact that literacy needs change over time and according to age, gender, language, and the context in which these literacies are being used.

- ✧ Policies need to be able to respond readily to society's changing needs as literacies previously dominant become displaced by newly emerging ones.
- ✧ Governments need to accommodate and value the full range of literacies, regardless of whether these are currently the dominant literacies.
- ✧ Any definition of literacy adopted must be broad enough to encompass the existing multiple literacies without being either so broad as to be meaningless, or indistinguishable from educational outcomes in general.
- ✧ Government policies need to support initiatives that enable lifelong learning to occur in both informal and formal situations.
- ✧ There needs to be an integrated approach at federal and state levels.

### For literacy testing

- ✧ Implicit in the current approach to national literacy testing is an assumption that those on the lower levels of attainment have failed to meet the national standard and are thus at fault in some way for their 'poor' performance. Instead of a deficit model which implies that individuals are to blame for their poor literacy skills, there needs to be a more productive approach which values local and other less dominant literacies.
- ✧ The concept of multiple and situational literacies has implications for the use of benchmarking as a means of assessing individual levels of literacy skills.
- ✧ More thought needs to be given to alternative monitoring and accounting mechanisms.

### For practitioners

- ✧ Practitioners need to be able to recognise and teach the different literacies needed by learners. They need also to value local literacies as well as the more dominant literacies.
- ✧ In the case of current workplace literacy approaches, the dominant practices of workplace literacy encapsulate what employers, economists and government policy-makers perceive to be in the best interests of the economy. There needs to be a greater recognition of the diverse needs of adult learners.
- ✧ All teachers are teachers of literacy. Once seen to be the province of language teachers, literacy is now recognised as being cross-disciplinary.
- ✧ The full range of literacies possessed by learners needs to be valued. There may be acquisition of skills across the various literacies at different rates.
- ✧ There is no single or universal method of teaching literacy.

A broad conception of literacy entails a teaching and learning process (including assessment) which is focused on meaning-making. That is, rather than merely reproducing uncritically what is taught, learners are able to make sense of the world and develop their own perspectives. This implies both an engagement with the world and the capacity to critique that world. If this broader conception of literacy is overlooked, then literacy becomes little more than the mastery of a series of sub-skills, rather than the genuinely transforming experience which current conceptions of literacy—as social practice, critical engagement, context-specific and multiple—suggest it should be.

## A paradigmatic shift

ways of  
conceptualising  
21st century  
society

The theoretical developments which have occurred in the field of literacy need to be situated within the broader context of the profound economic, social, political and cultural changes that have taken place over the past half century. These changes—described variously by theorists in terms of a ‘post-industrial society’, ‘information society’, ‘information economy’, ‘knowledge society’, ‘global village’, or as the embodiment of late capitalism or ‘new times’—are here being theorised as symptomatic of a postmodern ‘condition’ or ‘dominant’ (Jameson 1984; 1991; Harvey 1989). As McHale points out, such concepts are ‘discursive artifacts’ or fictions, constructed by theorists to foreground particular aspects of contemporary society (McHale 1987, p.4).

In this discussion paper the conceptual framework adopted to elucidate current thinking about literacy is that of a shift from modernity to postmodernity, from a modern to a postmodern condition.

modern and  
postmodern  
world views

Postmodernism is both a tool of analysis and a condition of postmodernity. According to McHale, it is ‘post’ modern in the sense of following *from* modernism rather than following *after* modernism (McHale 1987, p.5). Modernity and postmodernity are being understood here not as historical epochs defined by chronological boundaries, but rather as ways of viewing the world. Foucault, for example, talks about ‘the attitude of modernity’ (Foucault 1984), while others refer to postmodernity as ‘a state of mind, a critical, self-referential posture and style, a different way of seeing and working’ (Usher & Edwards 1994, p.2). For Jameson, postmodernism is a ‘new, systematic cultural norm’ (Jameson 1991, p.6), to be understood ‘not as a style but rather as a cultural dominant: a conception which allows for the presence and coexistence of a range of very different, yet subordinate, positions’ (p.4). The paradigmatic shift from a modern to a postmodern sensibility is a manifestation of the various developments and tendencies of recent history, transforming fundamentally, both the material world and the ways in which we think about this world.

common  
cultural patterns  
or tendencies

Cahoone’s comment in relation to modernity applies equally to postmodernity: ‘The concept of modernity makes sense only if we accept the notion that diverse sectors of modern culture and social life exhibit or have exhibited a common pattern or tendency ... despite their differences and alleged contradictions’ (Cahoone 1988, p.1) Such common tendencies, he suggests, would ‘all cohere in some way to form a spiritual-cultural amalgam’. The following outline is a distillation of the main characteristics generally attributed to modernity and postmodernity and is offered as a means of framing the debate about current developments in literacy theorisation. The focus in this paper is on the common patterns or tendencies in each ‘dominant’ form rather than on their internal disunities.

# Characteristics of modernity

Despite some contradictory impulses, modernity is most commonly associated with qualities such as rationality, linearity, utopianism, essentialism and universality. The ‘spiritual–cultural amalgam’ which Cahoon associates with modernity embraces ‘the technological mastery of nature, democracy, the supremacy of the nation-state, modern science, secularism and humanism’ (Cahoon 1988, p.1). Baudelaire defines modernity as ‘the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable’ (cited in Harvey 1989, p.10). In modernity it is the second half of Baudelaire’s conception that is particularly relevant when considering the differing sensibility of postmodernity, which can be understood as both a reaction to and an intensification of certain tendencies immanent in modernity.

main features  
of modernity

Fundamental to modernity is a faith in scientific rationality and the notion of human progress. Habermas has described the ‘project’ of modernity, which emerged in the eighteenth century, as one in which Enlightenment thinkers sought ‘to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic’ (cited in Harvey 1989, p.12). Reason was the liberatory force that could bring about both individual emancipation and a rational social order. On the one hand, Enlightenment thinking would help free the human mind from ‘the irrationalities of myth, religion, superstition, release from arbitrary use of power as well as from the dark side of our own human natures’ (Harvey 1989, p.12). On the other, it would lead to the establishment of a ‘state-based, centralizing, Unitarian and strictly non-pluralist model of the nation, with its sharp divide between the public and private spheres’ (Silverman 1999, p.3).

modernity’s  
faith in reason  
and progress

For Gaggi, modernity embodied one of the basic premises of the humanist tradition: ‘the confidence in reason as a faculty enabling humans to come to an understanding of the universe, the belief in the existence of the self and the acceptance of the individual as the primary existential reality’ (Gaggi 1989, p.11). Both the self and reality were assumed to be unitary and unproblematic. Language was transparent and fixed, the unmediated expression of a single reality.

language as  
fixed and  
unproblematic

Lyotard uses the term ‘modern’ ‘to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse ... such as the dialectics of the Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth’ (Lyotard 1984). Such narratives function as a means of legitimating particular world views or sets of cultural practices. Thus the Enlightenment narrative of emancipation, like other meta or grand narratives, is a ‘discourse of legitimation’ (Lyotard 1984).

the function of  
meta-narratives

History in modernity is teleological and ordered, a series of linear successions which privilege the stories of victors rather than those of the vanquished or marginalised. The modern way of looking at the past involves a search for origins and the notion of human development as a civilising process. The truth, which is unproblematised, can be discovered through facts. Foucault talks of the project of a ‘total history’ that seeks:

linear,  
cumulative  
history

... to reconstitute the overall form of a civilization, the principle—material or spiritual—of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion—what is called metaphorically the ‘face’ of a period. (Foucault 1972, p.9)

It is this totalising imperative—the impulse to order and to apply principles which allow for a unified or coherent view of the world—that has been so vigorously repudiated by postmodernist thinkers.

In education there is a similar totalising view of knowledge in which the learner is inculcated into particular fields of knowledge, each with its own truth and

features of a modern education	<p>epistemological foundations, its own 'story', which is given a certain fixity and universal quality through the medium of print. If history is presented largely as the story of (male) heroes, and literature as the transmission of selected works of canonical status, science in modernity is largely the history of intellectual discoveries which reveal and/or reinforce the foundational principles of science. A subject like mathematics is taught primarily as an intellectual pursuit rather than as applied knowledge to be used in everyday life.</p>
the passive learner	<p>Knowledge in modernity is seen as having intrinsic value. Pedagogy involves the transmission of this knowledge from a knowledgeable person to the learner. Under this 'banking' approach to education, the teacher 'talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalised and predictable', and fills the student with 'contents' that are 'detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance' (Freire 1972, p.45). The learner brings little to the learning situation except the capacity to absorb and recall.</p>
the integrative function of education	<p>Education more generally in modernity performs an integrative function by preparing us for the 'wider' world of state, economy and politics (Hinkson 1991, p.29) and by introducing us 'to forms of understanding which are implicit defences of the continuing social order' (Hinkson 1991, p.27). Various theorists have described the ways in which education in the service of the state perpetuates the culture of dominant groups while leaving 'students embedded within a social order and its central institutional form (the state) which seems natural' (Hinkson 1991, p.21). In modernity the state takes responsibility for education (Usher &amp; Edwards 1994, p.172) but the nature of the state itself, and of education, including its purpose/function and underpinning assumptions and values, are fundamentally transformed in postmodernity.</p>
physical capital and the Fordist era	<p>Another characteristic tendency in modernity which is both intensified and transformed in postmodernity, with implications for thinking about literacy, is the internationalisation of the economy. Modernity coincided with a period of 'modernisation' and a particular form of industrialism dating roughly from the late nineteenth century and reaching 'its most dynamic expression in the postwar boom' (Murray 1990, p.41). There was a shift, for example, from nineteenth century production methods which relied on coal and steam, to production methods using the new technologies based on electricity, oil and petrol (Hall &amp; Jacques 1990, p.25). The modern faith in scientific rationality reached its zenith in the mass production systems of Henry Ford. Murray (1990) identifies four key characteristics of what is generally called the Fordist era: standardised products; specialised machinery to do particular jobs; scientific management of time (Taylorism); and assembly line production. A vast range of manufacturing industries, from ship-building to petrochemicals, electrical goods to transport equipment, 'became the propulsive engines of economic growth, focused on a series of grand production regions in the world economy' (Harvey 1989, p.132).</p>
the modern workplace	<p>In practice, a Fordist approach meant a sharp division between the mental and manual aspects of a job. Management made decisions and 'deskilled' workers needed only to perform specific, often repetitive, tasks. 'Workers, hired from the neck down, had only to follow directions and mechanically carry out a rather meaningless piece of a process they did not need to understand as a whole, and certainly did not control' (Gee, Hull &amp; Lankshear 1996, p.26). Workers were interchangeable and management was both centralised and hierarchical. In Australia a bipartite system of technical and academic schools ensured that those who were not intending to go to university could opt out of a more general education to specialise in trades and technical subjects.</p> <p>Being literate in nineteenth century modernity was initially associated with being a good citizen but, with the emergence of psychometric testing, became less associated with moral virtue and more closely associated with scientifically measurable performance</p>

(Cook-Gumperz 1986). Underpinning the psychometric model was an assumption that cognitive skills are developmental and that poor performance on such tests indicates a lack of ability on the part of an individual rather than the impact of sociocultural factors (Cook-Gumperz 1986, p.37). Associated with this trend is a shift from a broader conception of literacy for all, to one in which literacy becomes associated with school or transactional literacy. While the psychometric/cognitive model still exists today, it has come under sustained attack in recent years, as will be seen later in the paper.

modern  
conceptions of  
literacy

Thus, while modernity is generally located as coming after, and thus displacing, the medieval epoch, postmodernity represents not the end of modernity but 'another relation' to modernity (Lyotard 1984 cited in Peters 1995, p. xxiii). There are features of modernity that are still to be found in postmodernity, albeit in a more intensified or heightened fashion, as well as developments that signal a radically different sensibility. The broad shift from a modern to a postmodern condition or view of the world is reflected in the changing perceptions of education and literacy.

the shift to  
postmodernity

## Characteristics of postmodernity

While several theorists have used the term 'postmodern' in relation to the so-called new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel 2000; Agnello 2001), it has generally been used to refer to a literacy that makes use of the post-structuralist tool of deconstruction. Agnello is one of the few to try to theorise the changing understandings of literacy in terms of a modern/postmodern paradigmatic shift, although her conceptualisation forms part of a case for ensuring the critical, deconstructive dimensions of the new literacies are taken up by practitioners, rather than sketching the ways in which the new literacies might be considered postmodern. That is, she is still more interested in 'postmodern' literacy as an analytical tool rather than postmodernity itself as a cultural condition which has given rise to new understandings of literacy.

postmodernism  
as a critical tool

In postmodernity it is those 'modern' tendencies, highlighted by Baudelaire, most associated with ephemerality and fragmentation that are foregrounded and heightened, while those tendencies associated with fixity and absolutism are radically undermined. The features commonly associated with postmodernity have been well documented. Here we consider mainly those which have implications for thinking about literacy.

Lyotard defines postmodernism as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard 1984). Different theorists have highlighted the ways in which the totalising imperatives of Enlightenment grand narratives have ended in the terror of the gas ovens of Auschwitz or the gulags of Stalinist Russia. Put simply, 'progress' in the western world has, in many instances, been the result of exploitation. Implicit in the emancipatory narratives is a terroristic imperative that destroys those who stand in the way of 'progress'. Thus systematic extermination of Jews, gypsies and homosexuals could be carried out with impunity during the Nazi years in the name of a racially pure, unified and strong German state.

the problematic  
nature of  
totalising  
narratives

Totalising narratives have given way in postmodernity to local narratives. Broad sweeping histories have been displaced by 'depth' or vertical histories which focus on the ruptures and discontinuities in history. It is not simply that the grand narratives themselves have been repudiated, but that the whole western intellectual tradition which spawned and legitimated such narratives, has been challenged. Derrida has used the term 'logocentrism' to refer to those modes of thought that derive their legitimation externally (such as from a divine being or science or the notion of truth), and which are based on the supposition that ideas exist independently of the language through which they are expressed (Jefferson 1986).

the rise of local  
narratives

## A post-structuralist perspective

multiple realities

the arbitrary nature of language

In postmodernity, there are multiple realities rather than a single objective reality, for whose 'reality' is being privileged at any moment in history? Whose 'reality' prevails when there are competing perspectives? In highlighting the slippage or gap between an object (the signified) and the language that names this object (the signifier), post-structuralism offers an even more fundamental challenge to 'modern' thinking. Post-structuralism reveals the instability and indeterminacy of language. Words derive their meaning in relation to other words rather than in relation to particular objects. Post-structuralist thought, with deconstruction as its mode of analysis, undermines one of the definitive elements of modernity—that correspondence between the word and object, between the name given to something and the something that is named. Once the arbitrariness of this relationship is accepted, then previously stable categories are revealed for what they are—social constructions—and the status of these categories is radically undermined. From a postmodern perspective, there can be no reality outside discourse. Categories such as normality, sexuality, power, class, society, femininity and identity become relative and contextualised, reflections of particular historical or cultural circumstances rather than universal. From a post-structuralist perspective, they become constructions of the human mind and are thus fallible and problematic. Postmodernity is thus characterised by a 'hyper-reality' whereby the 'truth' of cultural practices and objects lies 'not in how closely they represent reality but rather in their referentiality, their relationship to other signifiers' (Usher & Edwards 1994, p.15).

a post-cognitive world

While modernity, too, had restless, anarchic impulses and a 'growing uneasiness with the categorical fixity of Enlightenment thought' (Harvey 1989, p.29), its tendency towards pluralities was less profoundly transformative than has been the case in postmodernity. As Harvey points out, modernism—that is, the strand of modernity most commonly associated with aesthetic endeavour—'took on multiple perspectivism and relativism as its epistemology for revealing what it still took to be the true nature of a unified, though complex, underlying reality' (Harvey 1989, p.30). McHale points to the key difference between this and postmodernity when he conceptualises the shift from a modern to a postmodern condition as a shift from an epistemological to an ontological dominant (McHale 1987). That is, rather than asking such questions as 'What is there to be known?' or 'How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?', a postmodern approach is to ask 'Which world is this?', 'What is to be done in it?' and 'Which of my selves is to do it?' (McHale 1987, pp.9–10).

modern assumptions discredited

Postmodernity in this sense is both 'post-cognitive' (Higgins, cited in McHale 1987, p.10) and 'post-epistemological' (de Alba et al. 2000). Foundational principles and universal values have been systematically challenged in disciplines as diverse as literature, anthropology, linguistics, psychology and history. At the same time there has been a new valuing of popular or 'low' culture. Not only has the status of canonical works been interrogated by feminists and postmodern theorists, but the very concept of a canon has been discredited.

the new social movements and a new inclusiveness

If post-structuralist thinking has undermined the dominance of particular groups by challenging the intellectual foundations of their legitimacy, it has also intersected with the 'new social movements' of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw the breakdown of former constellations of power in favour of a new inclusiveness. Post-structuralism challenged the ways in which language contributed to the subjugation of marginalised groups. Political activism by blacks, women, homosexuals and 'greenies' paved the way for new ways of thinking about the rights of minority groups and the need to protect a fragile environment. Pluralism, diversity and a valuing of the other are key characteristics of

postmodernity. In Australia, tolerance of diversity has been enshrined in government policies celebrating multiculturalism.

## The fluid and the fleeting

Another feature considered synonymous with postmodernity is that of the image and information revolution which have so profoundly transformed human relations and our understandings of what is to be human. At one level the new technologies, which enable children to be conceived posthumously or gestated in post-menopausal women, or which allow humans to live for years in a vegetative state with machinery performing the life-sustaining functions of the material body, raise ontological questions to do with the very nature of 'human-ness', that is, what constitutes identity and personhood. At another level the new technologies have precipitated a communications revolution which has profoundly changed social relations.

the image and  
information  
revolution

Just as the development of writing was thought by Goody and Watt, among others, to result in 'the growth of individualism, the growth of bureaucracy and of more depersonalised and more abstract systems of government, as well as the development of the abstract thought and syllogistic reasoning that culminate in modern society' (Gee 2000? p.53), so the emergence of the new information and communication technologies is perceived by many theorists to have ushered in different ways of relating to the world and to others. Poster, for example, conceptualises three different 'stages' or modes of information—oral, print and electronic—that are not sequential or progressive but 'coterminous in the present' (Poster 1990, p.6). In the print stage—associated in this paper with modernity—'the self is constructed as an agent centered in rational/imaginary autonomy', while in the electronic stage—here being conceptualised as postmodernity—'the self is decentered, dispersed, and multiplied in continuous instability' (p.6).

print versus  
electronic  
technologies

In a modern world, relations were grounded largely in the presence of the other. In schools, for example, students experienced face-to-face contact with a teacher and peers. In a postmodern world social relations are attenuated, increasingly conducted via email and text messaging. 'By distancing emitter and emittee, electronic communication disturbs our normal conceptions of relations between speaker and hearer, or between writer and reader, thereby reconstituting both subjects and their relations to symbols' (de Alba et al. 2000, p.142). For Lyotard, computerisation is the key development that differentiates postmodernity from modernity, ushering in a world characterised by the 'atomization' of the social into 'flexible networks of language games' (Lyotard 1984) and relations 'which are essentially networks of fleeting or temporary interchange' (Hinkson 1991, p.9).

attenuated  
social relations

As well as enabling the unprecedented production and flow of information and images globally, the technological and communications revolution has precipitated the globalisation of national economies. A key difference between the international markets of the modern era and the global markets of the postmodern era is the role of technology in facilitating a 'borderless', fluid world. Older manufacturing industries which depended on physical capital—such as manual labour, the transportation of raw materials, factories and warehouses—have been displaced by industries that depend on intellectual assets. Human capital is the currency of postmodern industries. Instead of transporting raw materials, industries in a postmodern era rely increasingly on the dissemination of knowledge or information, which has significant implications for both education and literacy.

a globalised  
economy

## Post-Fordism

features of a globalised economy	<p>In its <i>Literacy in the information age</i>, the final report on the International Adult Literacy Survey, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) notes two key changes that have contributed to its particular view of literacy: globalisation and the emergence of the knowledge economy, both driven by scientific and technological advances (OECD 2000, p.1). Those features identified as integral to the structural changes that have taken place in OECD countries are also those features commonly associated with postmodernity, such as a growing interdependency among countries and corporations ‘through increased trade, foreign investment, international sourcing of production inputs’, ‘the deregulation and liberalisation of foreign trade and capital movements’, outsourcing of services and growing casualisation of labour, and increased competition (OECD 2000, p.1).</p>
the need for a multi-skilled and flexible workforce	<p>For the OECD, such developments have precipitated changes in workplace management and in the skills required. There has been a shift to a less hierarchical management structure with a greater focus on teamwork and delegation of responsibility and to a more flexible, multiskilled workforce. The OECD also refers to evidence showing ‘that productivity is positively related to investment in education and training, and that there are tight links between organisation, skills and training on the one hand, and productivity and competitiveness on the other’ (OECD 2000, p.7). It is this kind of thinking that has so influenced national governments in their language and literacy policy development (Hamilton, Macrae &amp; Tett 2001; Kell 2001).</p>
intellectual capital	<p>According to Eger, the common goals of national information strategies in almost every developed country are to mobilise resources and intellectual capital; to attract ‘high tech information-sensitive jobs’; and to create a skilled workforce which can take advantage of the shift towards a global information economy (Eger 1996). This convergence between technology and economics is reflected, for example, in the National Office for the Information Economy’s <i>Strategic frameworks for the information economy</i>, in which the role of government is described as being to provide an environment ‘conducive to investment in new technology, to the formation and growth of new enterprises, and to the acquisition of information technology skills and knowledge’ (National Office for the Information Economy 1999).</p>
features of a postmodern workplace	<p>Hall and Jacques suggest that the new workplace is characterised by more flexible and integrated production based on information technology and microelectronics; flexible teamwork rather than hierarchical management practices; greater divisions in the job market between those with high-tech skills and those with low-skill, low-technology jobs; persistent mass unemployment; increased part-time and short-term contract work; and the marginalisation of unions (Hall &amp; Jacques 1990, p.33).</p>
lifelong learning	<p>To meet the new needs of the postmodern global workplace, as noted in the OECD report cited earlier, workers must be multiskilled and geographically mobile. To ensure ongoing employability, workers need to be receptive to lifelong learning, and educational institutions need to be able to offer multimodal delivery of learning packages. Knowledge, Lyotard suggests, becomes ‘exteriorised’ in respect to the ‘knower’ (Lyotard 1984).</p>
knowledge as a commodity	<p>Postmodernity is characterised by the ‘mercantilization’ of knowledge (Lyotard 1984), in which knowledge is no longer valued in and for itself but becomes a commodity: ‘Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange’ (Lyotard 1984). In a postmodern era education services are amongst Australia’s major exports.</p> <p>According to Hinkson, it could be expected that there would be a major transformation in education once ‘the social space of modernity under the influence of the social</p>

groupings called forth by writing, especially that transformation of writing within modernity called the printed word, is displaced by a social space constituted by the information and image revolution' (Hinkson 1991, p.27) and an emphasis on immediacy, disembodiment, and 'depthlessness' (Jameson 1991). Under this shift, Hinkson suggests, mental labour takes new forms.

characteristics  
of the  
information age

In the classroom, for example, there is a focus on intellectual training rather than the broader sense of knowledge that underpinned a modern curriculum. In a postmodern world it is the processes themselves, the skills that will enable flexibility, that become the new content. Knowing *about* something has been replaced by knowing *how* to do something (de Alba et al. 2000, p.139). In relation to the new emphasis on intellectual training, Hinkson notes that 'one trains for particular jobs by developing abstract analytical capacities' (Hinkson 1991, p.31). Because information and technology become obsolete so quickly, these skills and understandings need to be continually updated, hence the widespread belief in industrialised countries that 'learning how to learn, to adapt to change and to make sense of vast information flows are now generic skills that everyone should acquire' (Commission of the European Communities 2000, p. 11). Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) suggest that while workers under 'old capitalism' sold their labour with little mental, social or emotional investment, today they are 'asked to think and act critically, reflectively, and creatively' (Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996, p.7).

intellectually  
trained  
workers

Portability of skills requires a different approach to teaching. In keeping with this notion of 'learning how to learn' as opposed to learning particular knowledge, the teacher in postmodernity is engaged not in the transmission of knowledge but in facilitating skills-acquisition. In keeping with a pedagogical orientation that privileges the role of the learner, the learner is now encouraged to construct his/her own learning. This manifests itself in curriculum frameworks that are outcomes-based and that emphasise inquiry-based approaches to learning. In such an education system the teacher has 'that diminished presence of the skills-oriented teacher who facilitates learning, on the one hand, and, on the other, that collective representation, the data in the databank, which is a consequence of the social efforts of others' (Hinkson 1991, p.12).

from  
knowledge  
transmission  
to skills  
acquisition

Adult learners returning to study can take advantage of more flexible delivery modes which enable learning to take place at home or in the workplace, in easily digested modules, and at a time that is convenient. Online learning communities offer collaborative learning possibilities.

In keeping with both the deconstructionist impulse of post-structuralism, and the focus on 'empowering' students to be able to conduct their own learning, there is also a strong focus on a critical, reflexive approach to knowledge. Learners are encouraged to contest and interrogate texts and viewpoints, rather than simply to absorb them. If 'postmodernism' has been attacked by some for its relativity, depthlessness, and nihilistic tendencies, it has also been lauded for its impulse to interrogate and expose dominant ideologies and power relations, and a willingness to give a voice to the previously silenced. It is these latter attributes in particular that are central to contemporary conceptions of literacy.

the critically  
aware learner

## Section summary

Contemporary understandings of literacy need to be seen in the context of the broader social, economic, political, social and cultural changes that have taken place in recent decades.

There has been a paradigmatic shift from a 'modern' to a 'postmodern' world with implications for education and literacy.

In particular:

- ✧ Multiple perspectives and relativism have replaced universal, unitary concepts and absolutes.
  - ✧ There is a greater acceptance and valuing of the experiences of the marginalised.
  - ✧ A globalised economy demands that nations be more competitive economically.
  - ✧ Intellectual capital has replaced physical capital in the workplace.
  - ✧ The workplace is less hierarchical and more team-oriented.
  - ✧ Individuals need to be able to locate, manage and evaluate a proliferation of information.
  - ✧ Workers need to be geographically mobile, adaptable and multiskilled.
  - ✧ Learning is now lifelong and not confined to the years of formal schooling.
  - ✧ Teaching has become more learner-centred, inquiry-based and outcomes-based.
  - ✧ The advent of the computer and internet enables more flexible delivery of learning.
  - ✧ The changing nature of the world demands new literacies and numeracies.
  - ✧ Literacy is recognised as cross-disciplinary rather than confined to language.
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# Common conceptions

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It is to be expected that conceptions of literacy could not remain unchallenged in a world of such profound social, economic, political and cultural transformations. The literature on literacy is so vast as to be almost overwhelming and continues to grow as more literacies are identified and theorised. For much of its recent history, literacy has continued to be conceptualised in terms of binary oppositions. There is an irony here. Binary thinking as a modern conceptual tool used to help order thought has been largely discredited by postmodern thinkers such as Derrida, but also by feminist writers who challenge its complicity in perpetuating a patriarchal value system, with its underpinning negativity towards women (see, for example, Moi 1986). Binary categorisations in relation to literacy, however, despite the problematic nature of such thinking, have provided a useful means of understanding the conceptual shift that has taken place from a largely cognitive, individual, psychometric model to a more pluralistic and contingent model of literacy. Common oppositions used by literacy theorists include:

- ✧ autonomous/ideological
- ✧ dominant/vernacular
- ✧ literacy/multiliteracies
- ✧ literacy/literacy practices
- ✧ positivist/interpretivist
- ✧ human capital literacy/cultural literacy
- ✧ functional–economic/social practice
- ✧ modern/postmodern
- ✧ school/community/work literacies
- ✧ basic/functional–vocational/critical
- ✧ lingering basics/new basics/elite/foreign language
- ✧ preliterate/literate/postliterate societies
- ✧ growth-through-heritage/cognitive–psychological/skills measurement.

defining  
literacy in  
terms of  
oppositions

## Autonomy versus ideology

Perhaps the most influential conceptualisation of literacy is that offered by Street (1984) in which he sets up an 'ideological' model in opposition to the 'autonomous' model of writers like Goody and Watt (1968) and Ong (2002). For Goody and Watt, the invention of writing signals the emergence of the literate society and the beginnings of a 'technology of the intellect' (Goody & Watt 1968, p.25). Literacy enabled the past and present to be recorded; it also enabled the development of intellectual tools of analysis and the emergence of 'a logical, specialised, and cumulative intellectual tradition' (p.68). For Ong, too, the technology of writing enables a different way of thinking: it

literacy as 'a  
technology of  
the intellect'

‘restructures consciousness’ and establishes an independent or autonomous discourse ‘detached from its author’ (Ong 2002, p.77). The technology of writing, from this perspective, is responsible for transforming human consciousness, and thus embodies the ‘modern’ spirit which saw technological and scientific advancement as the motor of human progress and enlightenment.

writing as an autonomous act

While Ong perceives spoken utterance to be ‘part of a real, existential present’, occurring between individuals ‘at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words’, he claims that written words ‘are isolated from the fuller context in which spoken words come into being’ (p.100). An ‘autonomous’ tradition thus assumes that the skills of reading and writing have independent characteristics that are ‘universal across time and space, and generate consequences—for cognition, social progress and individual achievement—that are general rather than cultural specific’ (Baker & Street 1994, p.3453). This conception of literacy as an intellectual tool facilitating the emergence of modernity is in stark contrast to contemporary conceptions of literacy, which deny the implied universality, teleological imperatives and moral superiority inherent in notions of progress and civilisation.

critique of the autonomous model

In keeping with postmodern thinking, Street challenges this ‘autonomous’ view of literacy. He questions the assumption of a linear, progressive view of history in which literacy and literate societies are implicitly equated with ‘civilisation’. He challenges the notion that literacy can be regarded independently of its social context. An autonomous model, he suggests, places emphasis on ‘the cognitive consequences of literacy acquisition, on the implications of literacy for social and economic development, and on individuals acquiring the written code’ (Baker & Street 1994, p.3454). Such an approach to literacy implies a homogenisation that ignores the variety of practices which exist (Street 1993). In conceptualising an oppositional ‘ideological’ model of literacy, Street is not denying the cognitive or technical aspects of literacy, but simply recognising that each literacy practice occurs within particular structures of power and cultural contexts (ed. Street 1993, p.9). He challenges the taken-for-granted nature of the authorial position which presents literacy as unproblematic and oblivious to its own ideological assumptions. What is presented as a ‘neutral’ conceptualisation of literacy is necessarily ideological, he points out, and, like literacy itself, cannot be separated from the social and ideological context in which it is embedded.

the ideological model

In contrast to the autonomous model, Street notes the development of ‘a more socially oriented view of literacy’ (Baker & Street 1994, p.3454). The ‘ideological’ model of literacy recognises above all the importance of context, seeing the skills of reading, writing and enumerating ‘as social practices, learnt in specific cultural contexts and imbued with epistemological significance’ (Baker & Street 1994, p. 3453). Whereas the main methodologies associated with the autonomous model are research based on experimental methods and a psychometric tradition of testing, the ideological model makes greater use of ethnographic studies which seek to understand the meaning of literacy practices for the participants themselves. In this conceptualisation, literacy practices are not simply the ‘observable behaviours around literacy’ but also ‘the concepts and meanings that are brought to those events and that give meaning to them’ (Street 1999, p.38). By implication, there is a valuing of the experiences of the other.

multiple literacies

If literacy is conceptualised as social practice rather than as an individualised, self-contained action, and is thus likely to differ from context to context, then it follows that there can be no such thing as a single, universal literacy but rather multiple literacies ‘that vary with time and place and are embedded in specific cultural practices’ (Street 1999, p.37). The concept of multiliteracies has been developed in particular by the New Literacy Studies Group, whose theorisations are supported by numerous ethnographic

studies—such as Street’s 1984 study of an Iranian village, and Barton and Hamilton’s 1998 study of community literacies in northern England—and whose approach to language and literacy draws on a range of disciplines. The concept of ‘literacy practices’ as opposed to ‘literacy’ owes much to the critical perspectives that have so transformed other disciplines, such as education, anthropology, linguistics, sociology and social psychology to name a few (Freebody & Welch 1993, p.3).

multi-  
disciplinary  
perspectives

If literacy is conceptualised as no longer merely a set of skills but as sociocultural practices to do with reading and writing, ‘then literacy competence and need cannot be understood in terms of absolute levels of skill, but are *relational* concepts, defined by the social and communicative practices with which individuals engage’ (Hamilton 2000, p.1) As with post-structuralist understandings of language, literacy cannot be understood independently of the context in which it is situated. What it means to be literate is relational to other literacies rather than an autonomous and disembodied entity. In post-structuralist terms, literacy is a social construct whose constitutive features will vary across time and cultural settings.

literacy as  
a social  
construct

## Social practices

In general, most conceptualisations, however worded, can be said to be variations on Street’s autonomous/ideological theorisation. For Barton and Hamilton, literacy is multiple, ‘patterned by power relations’, purposeful, historically situated and subject to change over time (Barton & Hamilton 2000, p.2). Social practices, in the sense in which they use the term, refer to those ‘general cultural ways of utilising written language which people draw on in their lives’ (p.8). They suggest that the concept of social practices is a useful theoretical tool as it highlights the ways in which the activities of reading and writing are shaped by the context in which they take place. While literacy practices are ‘cultural ways of utilising literacy’ (p.8), literacy events, or activities in which literacy has a role, highlight the contextualised nature of literacy. The concept of social practices, with their emphasis on how people in groups utilise literacy, is set up in opposition to more traditional ways of viewing literacy as an individual attribute or cognitive skill.

literacy as  
social  
practice

In keeping with this view of literacy as social practices, Hamilton (1999) distinguishes between dominant and vernacular literacies. The former are associated with formal learning and institutions while vernacular literacies are self-generated literacies associated with informal learning and everyday contexts and, as such, not always valued by those who legitimate the dominant practices. Studying vernacular literacies offers researchers the opportunity to better understand the meaning of the literacy experience for the learner and to help articulate the concerns and attitudes of participants. This approach is grounded in a conviction that vernacular literacies are ‘a specialised and powerful set of practices’ which need to be respected in their own right (Hamilton 1998). Literacy practices that would once have been marginalised, or at least not accorded the same value as dominant discourses, are now validated.

dominant  
and  
vernacular  
literacies

Hollingsworth and Gallego (1996) similarly adopt a framework that conceptualises literacy in terms of social context rather than cognition. For them, literacy is ‘a collection of discourse practices’ (p.267) and they make a distinction between discourses associated with school, community and the personal. School literacies are said to be a form of socialisation, with students acquiring the necessary ‘processes’ to be able to make sense of school subjects; community literacies enable an understanding of cultural traditions; and personal literacies are associated with ‘ways of knowing and believing about self’ (p.268). Wickert, too, is interested in ‘competing discourse sites’ (Wickert 1993, p.31), identifying

literacy as a  
collection  
of discourse  
practices

the media, classroom, workplace and government as sites that have constructed literacy in particular ways.

Watson, Nicholson and Sharplin (2001) conceptualise literacy in terms of social practices but posit this against a functional–economic model of literacy. The latter is associated with a skills-based approach to literacy and is reflected in the national training reform agenda that has characterised the 1990s in Australia. Social practices, on the other hand, are premised on the belief that literacy is socially constructed and historically situated.

## Metaphors of literacy

literacy  
as control

Searle (1999) offers a useful overview of the key ways in which literacy has been conceived, exploring the problematic nature of literacy in terms of the metaphors that have been used to conceptualise its characteristics. Using Barton's 1994 conceptual grid as a guide, Searle identifies at least seven ways in which literacy has been understood (Searle 1999, p.6). Throughout history, she suggests, literacy has been used as a means of social control. From the Ancient Greeks who used rhetoric as a means of persuasion, through those periods in history when institutions have sought to restrict literacy to particular elites in society, through the civilising imperatives of mass and compulsory education, right through to the early United National Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and World Bank literacy campaigns which linked literacy with economic productivity, literacy has been used as a means of exercising control over particular groups in society (Searle 1999, pp.7–8).

literacy  
as crisis

Another metaphor of literacy identified by Searle is the use of literacy statistics to construct a sense of 'crisis' in which apparently high rates of illiteracy threaten to jeopardise the economic development of a country. In an Australian context, for example, results of literacy surveys have been used to justify such government interventions as nation-wide literacy testing at particular year levels in schools, and the implementation of a compulsory literacy scheme for young people receiving unemployment benefits (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 1999).

literacy as  
fundamental  
right, and as  
social  
transformation

Searle describes other conceptualisations and their implications for pedagogy, such as the skills-based or autonomous model referred to above, in which illiteracy becomes synonymous with individual ignorance or inadequacy. In the 1970s progressive education was underpinned by a conception of literacy as a fundamental human right, with the capacity to empower individuals and to bring about social justice. For Freire literacy was a source of social and transformative action in which individuals brought about not only individual empowerment, but radical social change. Literacy in this sense is about transforming oppressive social circumstances and becoming politically active.

literacy as a  
technological  
tool

Literacy has also been viewed as a technology, or a tool that will give individuals access to particular skills and new kinds of knowledge. In a postmodern workplace literacy becomes associated with specific skills or competencies measurable against outcomes statements.

The final conception of literacy identified by Searle is that of literacy as a cultural activity or social practice.

## Pluralistic literacies

Rassool (1999) also favours a pluralistic view of literacy, conceptualising literacy in terms of basic, functional, critical and multiliteracies. Basic skills are associated with early

UNESCO programs, which focused on ‘the acquisition of technical skills involving the decoding of written text’ (Rassool 1999, p.7). UNESCO programs in the 1970s were underpinned by a functional or vocational/utilitarian view of literacy while the critical literacy of the 1970s, Rassool suggests, with its emphasis on empowerment and transforming lives, represented a challenge to the functional model. Multiliteracies, in turn, have challenged the concept of a one-dimensional literacy. Within this all-embracing term Rassool locates social literacies, such as those favoured by the OECD in the International Adult Literacy Surveys, cultural literacies, vernacular or local literacies, formal literacies and computer literacy.

from basic to multiple literacies

Falk and Millar (2001) make a similar distinction between functional literacy, integrated or socially embedded literacy, and critical literacy. They conceptualise literacy more specifically within a vocational education and training context, suggesting three common approaches to literacy: a basic skills approach which views reading and writing as cognitive skills; a ‘growth and heritage approach’ (p.24) which is usually associated with literacy acquisition as a means of empowerment and social action; and a ‘critical-cultural’ approach which focuses on ‘authentic’ everyday texts (p.26) and sees literacy practices as inevitably ideological and set within their own particular contexts.

Falk & Miller conceptualisation

The New London Group differentiates multiliteracies from ‘mere literacy’, which the group defines as ‘centred on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, which is conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence’ (New London Group 1996, p. 62). A pedagogy of multiliteracies, it is suggested, will be less authoritarian and focus on broader and more dynamic modes of representation. The concept of multiliteracies signals both a multiplicity of modes of meaning-making and cultural and linguistic diversity. While Street, too, supports the concept of multiliteracies, he also warns against reducing the concept of literacy to a set of competencies or skills, treating each literacy as though it were a separate literacy (Street 1999, p.38).

‘mere literacy’ versus multipliteracies

A different approach, which makes clear the economic assumptions underpinning the various conceptualisations of literacy, is that of Lankshear (1997), in which he situates four ‘types’ of literacy within the context of an emerging ‘new capitalism’. For Lankshear, literacy is usefully explained in terms of ‘lingering basics’, or those more traditional views of literacy which view it as a mastery of the basic skills necessary for understanding school work; ‘new basics’, in which the skills needed to contribute productively to a capitalist society are more abstract ‘symbol-logical capacities’ (p.314); ‘elite literacies’, which refer to higher-order skills; and ‘foreign language literacy’ which enables participation in the operations and dealings of a global marketplace.

basic, elite and foreign language literacies

Just as Goody and Watt talk of pre-literate and literate societies (Goody & Watt 1968), de Castell, Luke and Egan offer the notion of post-literate technologies (1986). Semali (2001), too, defines the new literacies as ‘those literacies which have emerged in the post-typographic era’ (p.1). For Semali, the concept of a post-typographic era ‘points to the fact that electronic texts are destabilising previously held conceptions of literacy’ and signals ‘an intellectual shift in the way information is designed, communicated and retrieved’ (p.1). Semali sees literacy as multiple and domain-specific. Thus he identifies a range of new literacies, including scientific literacy, computer literacy, music literacy and television literacy.

post-literate technologies

It is sometimes assumed that the plurality of literacies and rapidly changing technologies require higher levels of literacy in today’s society. Gee, however, questions the assumption that increasingly more sophisticated technology demands greater literacy skills, suggesting that, on the contrary, ‘increased technology often leads to deskilling people, and often

sophisticated technology can lead to deskilling

makes fewer demands on literacy skills, especially of the sort traditionally valued by schools' (Gee 1990, p.30).

## Human capital

Common to economic rationalist understandings of literacy is the notion of human capital, in which workers are vehicles for the economic progress of the nation. In this view literacy is associated with notions of individual productivity and those attributes that will enhance a person's performance in the interests of the nation.

literacy as  
economic  
sufficiency

Literacy today is commonly described in economic terms. A number of commentators, for example, have defined 'functional' literacy as the ability to read and write well enough to compete for economic sufficiency. Darcovich notes that International Adult Literacy Survey data have shown clear links to government policy in relation to the use of human capital to improve a nation's economic competitiveness, and to individual economic success (Darcovich 2000, p.374). The Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs publication, *Learning for the knowledge environment* (2000), argues the need for change in the education and training sector, including the development of strategies and the implementation of key initiatives:

... to ensure that all citizens possess broad literacy, numeracy and technological literacy skills for life, work, and lifelong learning and that there are adequate numbers of people with the specialist skills needed by the information and communications technology (ICT) industries and other Australian industries to service the needs of the economy.

(Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs 2000)

Similarly, an Australian Language and Literacy Council report notes the economic advantages to be derived from encouraging language and learning 'competence' in the workplace, suggesting that:

The return on investment in language and learning in the workplace goes far beyond the obvious economic advantages of higher quality output and reduced costs of production. The return on investment comes also from having a safer workplace, with the potential for enormous savings in economic and social costs associated with a reduced incidence of workplace accidents.

(Australian Language and Literacy Council 1996)

While neither the Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs nor the Australian Language and Literacy Council is here defining literacy explicitly as a set of vocational skills, there is an underpinning assumption that literacy skills are fundamental to both an individual's employment prospects and the nation's competitiveness in a global market.

literacy and  
notions of  
employability

In an effort to bridge the gap between those who define literacy in relation to productivity and those who conceptualise literacy more in terms of social and personal benefits, the OECD offers a broader conceptualisation of the notion of human capital. This notion goes beyond the possession of literacy, numeracy and workplace skills to the skills which allow individuals to develop and use these skills, such as the ability to learn, be organised, and plan ahead (OECD 2002). Like the employability matrix developed by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia (2002), literacy here becomes one of a sub-set of desirable attributes which increase an individual's employability. Implicit in this version of human capital is a conception of literacy that links it to an ability to gain employment, earn a higher income, and help bring about productivity gains on a national level (OECD 2002, p.120).

## Conscientisation

In contrast to the human capital/economic rationalist theorisations of literacy, Freire celebrates the process of ‘conscientisation’, that is, the acquisition of those skills and understandings which enable individuals to recognise and challenge the power relations that govern their lives. For Freire, literacy is a set of practices with the potential either to disempower—through the reproduction of the existing social formation with its embedded ideological assumptions and power relations—or empower individuals—by enabling critique and thus promoting emancipatory change (Freire 1972; Freire & Macedo 1987). Giroux (in Freire & Macedo 1987, Introduction) contrasts Freire’s conception of literacy as ‘a dialectical relationship between human beings and the world, on the one hand, and language and transformative agency, on the other’ with those contemporary discourses that reduce it to either ‘a functional perspective tied to narrowly conceived economic interests or to an ideology designed to initiate the poor, the underprivileged, and minorities into the logic of a unitary, dominant cultural tradition’ (Freire & Macedo 1987, pp.2–3). Literacy in this sense becomes a precondition for social and economic emancipation and cannot be understood ‘outside the world of culture because education itself is a dimension of culture’ (p.52).

literacy as  
emancipation

Freire and Macedo identify four approaches to literacy: the *academic* approach which views reading as the acquisition of ‘predefined forms of knowledge’, such as those associated with a ‘modern’ education, while ignoring an individual’s life history and cultural context; a *utilitarian* approach, which focuses on a narrow range of technical skills ‘while sacrificing the critical analysis of the social and political order which generates the need for reading in the first place’ (Freire & Macedo 1987, p.147); a *cognitive development* approach which ‘stresses the construction of meaning whereby readers engage in a dialectical interaction between themselves and the objective world’ (p.147) and which does not take into account the individual’s cultural background and language; and a *romantic* approach which, while ostensibly liberal, fails to problematise such issues as poverty or gender relations. In opposition to these models, Freire and Macedo posit an *emancipatory* literacy, a theoretical model which is grounded in critical reflection. A key characteristic of this approach is a conviction that, to be meaningful, literacy must be situated within a theory of cultural production ‘and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and reproduce meaning’ (1987, p.142).

academic,  
utilitarian,  
cognitive and  
romantic  
literacies

Freebody and Luke define literacy in terms of a repertoire of capabilities. Being literate means being able to decode written text, understand and compose meaningful texts, use texts functionally and analyse texts critically (Freebody & Luke cited in Lo Bianco & Freebody 2001, p.19). From this perspective learners are active rather than passive agents in acquiring literacy. As with Freire, there is a recognition that literacy ‘is also for acting on and in the world, not merely receiving, however critically, its forms’ (Lo Bianco & Freebody 2001, p.19).

literacy as a  
repertoire of  
capabilities

## New literacies

There is general agreement that different aspects of postmodernity have demanded different literacies (although this is not necessarily articulated in terms of postmodernism). Thus the shift from a print-based to an electronically mediated culture requires the skills to navigate the various information and communications technologies. The shift from a welfare state approach, in which the state shoulders the burden of health, education and welfare in the interests of its citizens, to a society in which individuals are expected to take on more of these responsibilities means that individuals today need to be able to access

shifting  
responsibility  
from the state  
to individuals

relevant information, critically evaluate and use it, understand the legal implications of particular transactions, and know their rights and obligations as consumers. The expectation that workers will be multiskilled and adaptable, and thus able to engage in lifelong learning, means that individuals need to be able to make informed decisions about the most appropriate learning styles and delivery modes for their particular needs.

For those consulted during the project, those capacities seen to be most relevant to a new millennium literacy are, to a greater or lesser extent, the abilities to 'read' a range of printed, electronic and visual texts; master the new communications technologies via spoken and written language; locate, manage, evaluate and use information or knowledge; and engage critically with media and other texts.

The boundaries of the 'new literacies' are not always clear. For example, critical literacy is also at times referred to as media or information literacy; information literacy has been used interchangeably with cyber, digital, electronic, computer, technological and library literacy; social literacy is seen variously as the ability to think critically, get along well with others, recognise which social behaviour is appropriate to particular settings, understand the use of language, and express a view confidently. In relation to information technologies, mastery is seen to entail both the technical capacity to use these technologies and the ability to recognise the protocols attached to each in different social contexts. Critical literacy is associated with almost every other literacy.

It is not clear whether these literacies constitute 'new' sets of skills and understandings necessary for a transformed world, or involve the application and adaptation of 'old' skills (reading, writing, speaking). That is, in what sense are the new literacies 'new'?

Consider, for example, what has been called financial literacy. In the 1950s it would have been enough for an individual to be numerate, to understand straightforward banking transactions such as the withdrawal and deposit of money, and to be able to complete application forms. Literacy in this sense entailed relatively simple technical skills. In today's world, however, financial literacy requires new knowledge (such as how automatic teller machines work) and new skills (such as how to make transactions online). While the need to cope with everyday financial transactions is not new, there is a new level of complexity, requiring new skills and understandings.

Similarly, in the case of health literacy, individuals in the 1950s entrusted their health to the care of doctors who were acknowledged as experts. The advent of the internet and substantial online resource collections, the significant advancements which have taken place in medical technology, and the shift to greater individual responsibility in the areas of health and welfare, mean that individuals today, if they are to be informed advocates for their own wellbeing, need to be able to access a wide range of resources, weigh up the information provided, and discuss the implications and options in a knowledgeable way with medical practitioners. The 'health literate' individual will also be aware of practices and thinking designed to enhance mental and physical wellbeing in everyday life and will have the ability to make 'healthy' choices.

## A basic or generic literacy?

Opinions vary as to whether some literacy skills can be regarded as common to all situations. On the one hand, there is the view that some skills that might appear to be situation-specific are common to all contexts. Examples include information literacy skills, critical thinking, reading, writing and listening. On the other hand, there is the view that the only 'transferable' literacy skills are the technical skills of decoding and encoding. Even the most ostensibly basic skill requires a knowledge of the context if

defining the  
new literacies

financial  
literacy

health  
literacy

domain-specific  
or transferable

individuals are to be able to understand and evaluate a situation or text. While it was pointed out by one consultant that to conceptualise literacy in terms of socially situated practices does not preclude the existence of some generic skills, such as the ability to decode written, visual or spoken text, there is a reluctance overall amongst contemporary theorists to identify skills as common or transferable. The new literacies in particular appear to have their own domain-specific skills, language and conventions.

The line between literacy and generic skills is not always clear. While computer literacy, for example, is generally assumed to be one of the new literacies, in the National Centre for Vocational Education Research's *Glossary of Australian VET training terms*, it is included as an example of a generic skill (Knight & Nestor 2000). In the same document the definition of 'generic skills' provides a cross-reference to 'key competency'. If a generic skill is being defined here as 'not specific to work in a particular occupation or industry, but is important for work, education and life generally, e.g. communication skills, mathematical skills, organisational skills, computer literacy, interpersonal competence, and analytical skills', then it is unclear how these are distinguishable from the skills often associated with the new literacies.

literacy and  
generic skills

Social literacy, for example, appears to be very similar to what has been called emotional intelligence, interpersonal understandings or generic skills. Literacy in this sense means the ability to 'read' people and to be able to respond appropriately in given situations, the same kind of behaviours and skills required in a workplace as outlined in *Employability skills for the future* prepared by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (2002). Such skills as empathising, working productively with people of different backgrounds and persuasions, and identifying the strengths of team members, for example, seem to be very similar to the skills being associated with social literacy.

social  
literacy

The employability skills report provides a comparative table of generic employability skills in Australia (based on the Mayer key competencies), the United Kingdom ('core skills'), Canada ('employability skills profile') and the United States ('workplace know-how'). The skills highlighted include working with others, decision-making, problem-solving, using technology, using mathematical concepts, applying numbers, communication skills and interpersonal skills (p.4). The skills identified as important by the Australian employers consulted in the course of the report include listening and understanding, speaking clearly and directly, writing to the needs of the audience, reading independently, using numeracy effectively, and collecting and analysing information. Again, these are very closely related to what is commonly thought of as literacy skills and raise the question of whether there are in fact basic or generic literacy skills. The whole thrust of contemporary research into literacy, however, denies notions of universality.

employability  
skills

The research does point to the importance of an ability to think critically. Fundamental to Freire's notion of conscientisation, for example, is the capacity to engage critically with the world, to analyse and reflect upon one's own experiences and circumstances, a necessary precondition if literacy is to be emancipatory. If decoding and encoding are the only skills that are seen to be fundamental to all literacies, then it needs to be recognised that, in keeping with the whole notion of social practices, decoding/encoding are not disembodied technical skills but critical tools. Decoding here is simultaneously an 'uncovering' and an act of interpretation. It is a means of making sense of a range of different signifiers, such as images, punctuation marks, gestures, a legal document and an electronic funds transfer at point of sale transaction. In the acts of decoding and encoding, participants are actively engaging with their world and thus increasing the possibility of changing it. In this sense, as an integral component of decoding, critical thinking could perhaps be considered generic or transferable.

decoding  
as generic

# The OECD and the International Adult Literacy Survey

A persistent strand of criticism in current thinking about literacy practices has been directed at international and national literacy testing and its association with a narrowly defined literacy based on arguably discredited assumptions. In particular, the International Adult Literacy Survey, which measures adult literacy performance in a range of OECD countries, and which has had a powerful influence at the level of national policy (Hamilton, Macrae & Tett 2001, p.23), has come under sustained attack from a number of literacy theorists.

International  
Adult Literacy  
Survey literacy  
domains

In the International Adult Literacy Survey, literacy is measured along a continuum in which five levels of proficiency denote 'how well adults use information to function in society and the economy' in the three domains of prose, document and quantitative literacies. The OECD takes pride in the fact that the survey 'no longer defines literacy in terms of an arbitrary reading performance', but now recognises 'the multiplicity of skills that constitute literacy' in advanced industrialised countries (OECD 2000, p.x). Despite this sanguinity, this survey has been systematically attacked for being precisely what it claims not to be: narrow and acontextualised.

critiques of  
International  
Adult Literacy  
Survey

For example, the survey has been criticised for its 'strongly controlled and narrowly focused approach to literacy and numeracy'; for 'homogenising' individual countries and treating adults as 'one undifferentiated mass of people whose basic skills needs have been defined by experts and who may or may not recognise the difficulties that they face'; and for treating those with lower level of literacy skills as having a deficit that needs to be rectified (Hamilton, Macrae & Tett 2001, p.33). It has been seen as part of a broader OECD and European Union agenda intended to reshape the schooling and training system 'as part of an agenda of human resource development' (p. 36). Kell (2001) notes that the three information-processing competencies measured in the survey are devoted entirely to print literacy. Despite the OECD's assertion that 'no single standard of literacy can be set', 'these surveys have tried to define literacy in generic terms from only one aspect. They have failed to see literacy as contextual and a response to needs and environmental challenges' (Kell 2001, p.25).

Kell also suggests that adults who achieve at a specific level are assumed always to perform at that level: 'There seems to be no notion that the reader's interest, participation or experience will mean that readers will move through these levels depending on the task. Nor is there any recognition of the situated quality of literacy' (Kell 2001, p.26). Other criticisms focus on the methodology, including the fact that participants may not be familiar with the tasks, or may well have other literacies which are not being measured. Kell notes the lack of commonality of populations or sub-populations between the surveys.

a central  
tension in  
literacy  
debates

Baynham (2003) offers a different perspective, seeing the International Adult Literacy Survey as both an example of the cognitive psychology model and an example of 'the generic transferable skills model of literacy, underpinning much of the current policy developments in adult literacy curriculum and assessment frameworks worldwide' (p.117). Underlying this, he suggests, is one of the central tensions in the nature of literacy debate: 'is it generic transferable skill or situated social practice?'

The purpose of the survey, Hautecoeur suggests, 'goes straight to the heart of the dominant discourse about "human capital" and the crucial socioeconomic importance of globalization ... Literacy is related above all to the competitiveness of business and the economic benefits of a skilled labour force' (Hautecoeur 2000, p.358).

Despite the postmodern nature of the global imperatives which form part of the rationale for having the survey in the first place, it is also framed within a modern perspective, particularly in its treatment of literacy as ‘a set of unproblematic, information-processing cognitive skills that are independent of the context in which they are used’ (Hamilton, Macrae & Tett 2001, p.23). On the one hand, then, the OECD conceptualises literacy in a way which recognises its importance in a globalised, knowledge-based, high-tech world while, on the other, also attributes to it a certain monolithic, universal character more usually associated with modern epistemological categories. That is, while literacy skills are seen to be critically important in today’s global economy, they are also assumed to be the same across all developed countries, despite the fact that ethnographic studies have shown the situatedness of literacy across cultures, times, age and gender categories. What is absent in the OECD rationale for the survey is a recognition of the situational nature of literacy.

homogenised and decontextualised literacy

Despite these substantive criticisms, Hamilton, Macrae and Tett (2001) note that the International Adult Literacy Survey has ‘become central to policy discussions. It has framed the terms of the debate, defined the scope and content of “literacy need”, who is deficient in literacy and why, and denied the central role of culture and relationships of power in determining literacy needs and aspirations’ (pp.24–5).

the influence of the International Adult Literacy Survey

The criticisms which have been levelled against the survey have also been made in varying ways against the psychometric tradition more broadly. Crowther, Hamilton and Tett (2001), for example, note the negative connotations of a testing system that ranks people hierarchically with an emphasis on what they cannot do rather than on what they can do (Crowther, Hamilton & Tett 2001, p. 2). Such an approach assumes that those on the lowest levels lack skills that they ought to have. Unlike contemporary approaches which start from the learner’s perspective and needs, such literacy tests serve to disempower rather than empower individuals because, despite the claim to be offering a test based on ‘real-life performances’, the starting point is nevertheless a set of autonomous skills rather than the lived experience of the learner. The tests impose a set of external standards on participants and ‘do not recognise the validity of people’s own definitions, uses and aspirations for literacy’ (Crowther, Hamilton & Tett 2001, p.2).

challenges to the psychometric tradition

## Overall

Based on the research, there appear to be three main conceptions of literacy which have currency in Australia today, with implications for policy-making and pedagogy. There is the cognitive, individual-based model associated with a psychometric tradition, quantifiable levels of ability, and a deficit approach to ‘illiteracy’—which is assumed unproblematically to be both an outcome of individual inadequacy, and a causal factor in unemployment. Aligned with this is an economics-driven model that is generally associated with workforce training, multiskilling, productivity, ‘functional’ literacy and notions of human capital. There is also a third sociocultural model that is most commonly associated with contextualised and multiple literacy practices, a valuing of the other, and a strong critical impulse. Of the three, it is this latter model that is most closely associated with the concept of an emancipatory literacy and a reflective, critical dimension. While the psychometric model is associated more closely with modernity than postmodernity, and the social practices model is consistent with a postmodern approach, the economic rationalist model has relevance both to modernity’s ‘state-sponsored schooling and the literacy education of children’—‘since a literacy-skills orientation was built into the project of modern(ist) schooling’ (Bigum & Green 1993, p.16)—and to postmodernity’s technological imperative and globalised economy.

three main conceptions

social,  
ideological,  
relative and  
situated literacy

In general, literacy today is perceived to be social by nature rather than an individual's autonomous set of skills, inescapably ideological rather than 'neutral', relative rather than invariant, and situation-specific rather than universal. There is general consensus among literacy researchers that the meaning of literacy depends on the context in which literacy is being used, by whom and for what purposes. How literacy is understood by theorists engaged in an academic discourse, for example, may be quite different from how employers, information communication technology experts, teachers, government policy-makers, Indigenous leaders, adult learners in a small rural setting, or students in a suburban high school understand literacy.

The research confirms the highly problematic nature of literacy definitions. While there is a recognition that some form of consensus needs to exist if literacy policy is not to become unmanageable, there is also a reluctance to try to identify constitutive features when a key assumption underpinning the notion of literacy practices is a denial of such universality. Literacy conceptions today are no longer limited simply to reading and writing. There is a general recognition that the changes which have so transformed the world in recent years demand a reconceptualisation of literacy to encompass a broader range of capabilities than in the past, and in recognition of its contingent qualities.

## Implications

Conceptions of literacy have broadened in recent years, necessitating a review of current state and federal policies to determine how these broader conceptions might be incorporated in policy and implemented in practice.

- ✧ Given that conceptions of literacy have broadened, policies that imply or function as though literacy can be defined operationally as a specific set of skills need to be critically examined.
- ✧ If literacy is situated, then there can be many kinds of literacy development. Such development can take place in many different ways.
- ✧ If literacy is situated, then policies and practices that rely on benchmarking and testing need to be critically examined.
- ✧ If literacy is multiple, then there can be no primary method of literacy development.
- ✧ If literacy is multiple, then policies that validate some literacies and not others need to be reviewed.
- ✧ If literacy is a social practice, then policies that support individual skilling and not community-capacity-building need to be critically examined.
- ✧ If literacy begins with the needs of the learner, then policies that are framed in narrow vocational terms need to be critically questioned.
- ✧ If the literacy needs of learners change over time, then policies, programs and departmental procedures that do not actively support lifelong learning need to be critically examined.
- ✧ If literacy means critically engaging with the world, then policies need to support the development of pedagogical practices that allow learners to construct their own perspectives.
- ✧ If literacy has multiple purposes, then one purpose for literacy development must not obstruct other purposes.
- ✧ If there are more or less dominant literacies, then one kind of literacy development must not be allowed to obstruct the development of other kinds of literacy.

- ✧ If there are more or less dominant literacies, then policies and pedagogical practice must also recognise and value those literacies that are less dominant.
- ✧ If literacy is multi-disciplinary, then policies that imply or function as though literacy is the prerogative of language teachers rather than the province of all teachers need to be reviewed.

### Section summary

Conceptualisations of literacy have changed over time. Reflecting the external changes which have taken place in the world in recent decades, the traditional autonomous model has been largely superseded by the 'ideological' model. While other conceptions of literacy have existed and continue to exist, most fall into one of these categories.

The 'autonomous' model:

- ✧ views literacy as evidence of human progress and a new kind of intellectual thinking
- ✧ views literacy as separate from its context
- ✧ has a unitary conception of literacy
- ✧ assumes literacy to be a neutral activity
- ✧ views illiteracy as an individual responsibility
- ✧ assumes literacy to be a cognitive, technical skill
- ✧ makes use of psychometric approaches
- ✧ views the skills of reading and writing as fundamental to individual and national economic productivity
- ✧ is print-based and assumes literacy to be the acquisition of written skills
- ✧ encourages inculcation into dominant ideologies and discourses.

The 'ideological' model

- ✧ views literacy as a social practice and recognises that different cultures have different literacies
- ✧ recognises the situatedness of literacy
- ✧ recognises that there are multiple literacies
- ✧ recognises its own ideological assumptions
- ✧ views illiteracy as a social responsibility
- ✧ assumes literacy to involve a complex range of skills
- ✧ makes use of ethnographic approaches
- ✧ sees the skills of reading, writing and enumerating as social practices
- ✧ is largely electronic-based and assumes literacy to be the acquisition of a whole range of understandings and skills, including visual and non-verbal.
- ✧ encourages interrogation of dominant ideologies and discourses.

The research shows there is a gap between current conceptions of literacy and current approaches to literacy at a policy level.

# Conclusions

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The research undertaken in the course of this paper indicates that literacy can no longer be assumed to be either a universal or unitary concept, nor can it continue to be unproblematically linked at a policy-making level to the demands of a globalised economy and a national training agenda that sees adult literacy primarily in terms of vocational outcomes.

In the first place, post-structuralist criticism has discredited the old absolutes and grand narratives to such an extent that, however literacy is conceptualised in the future, there is no going back to the notion of a single, 'one size fits all' model. If anything, it is possible that literacy will become even more fragmented and diverse as more literacies are 'discovered' and theorised. The ethnographic research carried out by Street, Hamilton, Barton and others reinforces the notion of contextualised and multiple literacies.

Secondly, the research highlights the ways in which literacy is embedded in sociocultural practices. There is a focus on the interactions between and within groups and on the kinds of learning that take place in such contexts. Literacy in this sense is a much richer experience than that associated with discrete employability skills and 'training'. Research by Castleton and McDonald (2002) found Australian policies and programs to suffer from 'an overemphasis on vocational outcomes at the expense of the *social and personal*', highlighting 'the inadequacy of a focus on narrow, task-based competencies in curriculum and support materials at the expense of developing underlying, enabling skills' (p.34).

The assumption of a direct causal link between literacy acquisition (as measured by international, national and local literacy tests) and individual employment prospects has also been challenged by a number of researchers, including those who argue that educators should remain critical of 'tendencies that reduce education to vocational training, aimed at "empowering" people to behave as individual competitors on the so-called free labour market' (Druine & Wildermeersch 2000, p.400).

Despite the research that shows literacy to be situated social practice, government policy currently is more closely aligned with the concept of literacy as a set of foundational and, by implication, transferable skills. While there is a strongly articulated belief that notice has been taken of contemporary research and theorisations—the Department for Education, Training and Youth Affairs publication, *Literacy for all* (1998), for example, claims to be underpinned by a 'comprehensive view of literacy [that] reflects current use of the term in the professional literature' (pp.7–8)—the document itself refers to 'basic literacy and numeracy skills' and the need to acquire 'foundation skills', terms more commonly associated with an autonomous and print-based model of literacy.

## For policy-makers

- ✧ The research indicates the need for a new national policy which recognises the wider context of changing social, political, economic and cultural realities and the emergence in recent years of ethnographic studies which challenge longstanding assumptions about literacy.

- ✧ Such a policy needs to be flexible enough to accommodate current and future literacies and to explicitly recognise the place of non-print technologies in any new conception of literacy.
- ✧ In keeping with the United Nations Literacy Decade guidelines and current focus on literacy as social practice, policies need to support community capacity-building and not simply individual skilling.
- ✧ Government policies should reflect the fact that literacy needs change over time and according to age, gender, language, and the context in which these literacies are being used.
- ✧ Policies need to be able to respond readily to society's changing needs as once dominant literacies become displaced by newly emerging ones.
- ✧ Governments need to accommodate and value the full range of literacies, regardless of whether these are currently the dominant literacies. Both governments and schools need to recognise and validate those literacies learners do have.
- ✧ Any definition of literacy adopted must be broad enough to encompass the multiple literacies that exist without being either so broad as to be meaningless, or indistinguishable from educational outcomes in general. A good starting point might be to see literacy as a set of tools facilitating an individual's participation in society. Such a conception is simple but accurate in terms of its recognition of literacy as a means rather than an end, an enabling practice, and the notion of social inclusiveness.
- ✧ Government policies need to support initiatives that enable lifelong learning to occur in both informal and formal situations. There needs to be a clear identification of the factors which militate against adult learners becoming literate, such as the financial costs involved or lack of childcare provision. There also needs to be greater support given to more flexible modes of delivery and the kinds of informal settings in which learning can take place.
- ✧ There needs to be an integrated approach at federal and state levels. Castleton and McDonald (2002), for example, argue for a whole-of-government approach across departments. The research also suggests there needs to be greater collaboration between state and federal departments when it comes to funding submissions and resource sharing.
- ✧ Government policies need to reflect and value other aspects of life, such as citizenship, leisure, work and schooling.
- ✧ There are implications for Indigenous learners. On the one hand, their social practices need to be valued and upheld; on the other, they need to be given the necessary skills to function adequately in everyday life. Nakata highlights the tension between 'upholding and maintaining cultural difference and identity on the one hand, and producing equal outcomes to make [indigenous learners] competitive in the mainstream on the other' (Nakata 2002, p.8).
- ✧ As Baynham points out, while many of the theoretical underpinnings of the new literacies 'are well established empirically, there still remains the issue of how these theoretically rich perspectives dialogue productively with public policy formation, for example in relation to curriculum and assessment regimes' (Baynham 2003, p.117).

## For literacy testing

- ✧ Current approaches to literacy testing have been challenged in the literature. Implicit in the current approach to national literacy testing is an assumption that those on the lower levels of attainment have failed to meet the national standard and are thus at fault in some way for their 'poor' performance, although the test itself may not be a true indicator of either the literacy levels of the individual or the dominant literacies in this learner's social context. Instead of a deficit model which implies that individuals

are to blame for their poor literacy skills, there needs to be a more productive approach that values local and other less dominant literacies.

- ✧ The concept of multiple and situational literacies has implications for the use of benchmarking as a means of assessing individual levels of literacy skills. The research raises serious questions about the extent to which the psychometric model on which international and national literacy testing is based is compatible with the new literacies.
- ✧ More thought needs to be given to alternative monitoring and accounting mechanisms. The United Nations, for example, argues for 'more adequate and reliable categories and indicators', and identifies the central problem of literacy monitoring and assessment as being 'the challenge of celebrating diversity while ensuring a unified, vision, framework and plan' (United Nations 2000, p.16).

### For practitioners

- ✧ Practitioners need to be able to recognise and teach the different literacies needed by learners. They need also to value local vernacular literacies as well as the more dominant literacies. They need to understand how literacy is acquired and how it is used for a range of purposes in a range of different contexts.
- ✧ The research confirms the principles that already underpin good pedagogy—that effective teaching practice begins with the needs of the learner. In the case of current workplace literacy approaches, for example, the dominant discourse of workplace literacy 'does not present workers' understandings (or voices) of work or of literacy at work' (Castleton & McDonald 2002, p.560). Instead workplace literacy skills encapsulate what employers, economists and government policy-makers perceive to be in the best interests of the economy. There needs to be a greater recognition of the diverse needs of adult learners.
- ✧ All teachers are teachers of literacy. Once seen to be the province of language teachers, it is now recognised as being cross-disciplinary. Thus scientific literacy, economic literacy, environmental literacy, health literacy and media literacy, among many others, all appear to have their own particular skills and understandings.
- ✧ The full range of literacies that learners have need to be valued. There may be differential acquisition of skills across the various literacies. For example, an individual may have limited reading and writing skills but may be highly literate when it comes to 'reading' visual images and codes. Alternatively, a person may be highly literate when it comes to written and oral communication but may struggle to use information communication technology.
- ✧ There is no single or universal method of teaching literacy. Much angst has been caused in the search for that one approach which could be replicated in all situations. The concept of situated and multiple literacies encourages a variety of pedagogical practices depending on the needs of the learner.
- ✧ As the United Nations Literacy Decade guidelines make clear, government policies need to support the capacity-building and literacy development of practitioners themselves, ensuring up-to-date understandings of theoretical and practical developments in the field.

As Lo Bianco and Freebody have pointed out, while definitions of literacy vary considerably, 'it is necessary to develop some coherent understanding of literacy that reflects the many capabilities required to become a participating member of a literate society' (Lo Bianco & Freebody 2001, p.20). What might such a 'coherent understanding of literacy' look like? What should be included and what excluded? The answer to this depends to a considerable degree on developing a better understanding of the new literacies. In particular, what are the characteristics of these literacies and what, if any, is

the nature of their interconnections? Is literacy to be defined in terms of specific skills, such as reading, writing and spelling, or more broadly as a set of learning tools? These are the kinds of questions that need to be teased out in the ongoing debate about the nature of literacy in a postmodern world.

A broad conception of literacy entails a pedagogy (and an assessment) that can be described as focused on meaning-making. That is, rather than merely reproducing uncritically what is taught, learners are able to make sense of the world and construct their own perspectives. This implies both an engagement with the world and the capacity to critique that world. If this broader conception of literacy is overlooked, then literacy becomes reductive, little more than the mastery of a series of sub-skills, such as using punctuation marks correctly, rather than the genuinely transforming experience that current conceptions of literacy—as social practice, critical engagement, situated and multiple—suggest it should be.

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# Appendix 1

**Summary table: Differing conceptions of literacy**

How defined	By whom	Features of this definition	Rationale	Implications/consequences
Basic	UNESCO (1956) World Bank	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ reading and writing 'a simple and elementary skill'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ literate individuals are needed to improve a nation's economic productivity;</li> <li>✧ literacy is associated implicitly with 'civilisation' and developed nations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ literacy is viewed as a cognitive/technical skill isolated from its context;</li> <li>✧ by implication, 'illiteracy' is associated with individual deficit, and is an individual rather than a social responsibility</li> </ul>
Functional	UNESCO (1950s, 1960s and 1970s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ reading and writing associated with 'basic learning needs'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ improving the skills of workers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ mass literacy campaigns were ineffectual because there was no sense of ownership by the workers</li> </ul>
A fundamental human right	UNESCO (1970s, 2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ reading, writing, arithmetic (1970s)</li> <li>✧ additional skills such as technological skills and cultural literacy (2003)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ a means to individual empowerment and social justice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ 'literacy as freedom' continues to underpin adult learning principles today; it implies active not passive learners and learner-centred pedagogical practices</li> </ul>
As 'economic sufficiency'	Various	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ reading and writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ individuals need to compete for employment and to be economically self-sufficient</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ offers a narrow view of literacy with little sense of the dimensions to a person's life</li> </ul>
A technology of the intellect	Goody & Watt (1968) Ong (1982) [2002]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ reading, writing, speaking</li> <li>✧ associated with the ability to think in a logical way</li> <li>✧ writing is an autonomous practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ literacy signals a new phase in human intellectual development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ the illiterate individual is held responsible for 'failure' to become literate</li> <li>✧ implies literate cultures are more 'civilised';</li> <li>✧ decontextualises literacy</li> </ul>
A process of conscientisation	Freire (1972) Freire & Macedo (1987) Lo Bianco & Freebody (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ interrogative, critical awareness</li> <li>✧ 'literacy is about acting on and in the world'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ empowers individuals; enables them to challenge dominant ideologies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ has the potential to transform social and political institutions</li> </ul>
Social practice	Street (1984) Freebody & Welch (1993) Wickert (1993) Baker & Street (1994) New London Group (1996) Hollingsworth & Gallego (1996) Lankshear (1997) Barton & Hamilton (1998, 2000) Rassool (1999) Watson, Nicholson & Sharplin (2001) Semali (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ multiple literacies</li> <li>✧ decoding is not simply a technical skill but has a critical component to it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ values the experiences of the marginalised</li> <li>✧ learning derives from the learner's needs (as perceived by the learner)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✧ acknowledges the ideological nature of literacy</li> <li>✧ multiple literacies need policies that will accommodate this plurality of needs and purposes and contexts</li> </ul>

How defined	By whom	Features of this definition	Rationale	Implications/consequences
Functional	Department of Employment, Education and Training (1990, 1991)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reading, writing, speaking, listening</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>enabling the accomplishment of everyday tasks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a individual cognitive skill</li> <li>onus is on the individual to improve literacy</li> <li>does not encourage social critique</li> </ul>
Integrated 'active literacy'	Australian Council for Adult Literacy (1989 cited in Wickert & Kevin 1995)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reading, writing, listening, speaking, critical thinking, numeracy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>using language to think critically and participate fully in society</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>still mainly print-based rather than recognising the demands made by new technologies</li> </ul>
'How adults use literacy to function'	OECD (1995)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reading and writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy recognised as a key to economic performance and the 'social cohesion of industrialised nations'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>recognises literacy's integrative potential but does not encourage social critique</li> <li>less importance given to other needs associated with personal growth</li> </ul>
Language and learning competence	Australian Language and Literacy Council (1996)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>contributes to a more economically competitive and safer workplace</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a narrow view of literacy with little sense of other dimensions to a person's life</li> </ul>
As 'a particular skill'	OECD (1997)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>understanding print, achieving personal goals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to fulfil personal goals at home, school or work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>offers a broader focus on the individual; focus on print; encourages conformity rather than a critical view of the world</li> </ul>
Lifelong learning	Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reading, writing, numeracy, technological skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to facilitate participation in lifelong learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy acquisition can occur at any time in an individual's life</li> </ul>
A technological skill	Snyder (2000)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reading, writing, speaking, listening, using technology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>enables individuals to make use of technology to facilitate their learning and to analyse their world</li> <li>needed to provide access to new technologies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>has a critical dimension; learners can see how technology constructs knowledge;</li> <li>literacy becomes one of the employability skills enabling workers to function satisfactorily in a postmodern workplace.</li> </ul>
A repertoire of capabilities	Freebody & Luke (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>different ways of using, understanding and analysing texts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>learners are actively engaged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>critical skills enable individuals to identify and challenge dominant ideologies</li> </ul>
As one of a range of generic skills	Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia (2002) OECD (2002)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>communication and interpersonal skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a wide range of non-subject-specific skills needed to obtain and retain employment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy is firmly linked to individual and national economic productivity</li> </ul>
A key learning tool 'an essential step in basic education'	UNESCO (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'multiple literacies which are diverse, have many dimensions, and are learned in different ways'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>literacy skills need to be related to real life situations; the world has changed and individuals need the skills to cope with these changes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>'illiteracy' is seen as a social responsibility rather than an individual responsibility</li> <li>recognises literacy is a means to an end (learning and a basic education) rather than an end in itself</li> </ul>

# Appendix 2

## Consultants

While there are many knowledgeable people who could have contributed to this paper, those invited to respond were seen to have particular expertise in the field and/or considered likely to provide insightful responses and to represent a diversity of views.

The consultants who kindly responded to the short survey were:

Steve Balzary	Director, Employment and Education, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Mary Nicholson	National Manager, Business Education, Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry
Joseph Lo Bianco	Chief Executive, Language Australia
Eva Cox	writer, social commentator, University of Technology, Sydney
Peter Huta	Manager, Community Connectivity, National Office for the Information Economy
Jean Searle	Director, Queensland Centre of Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium, Griffith University
John Spierings	Research Strategist, Dusseldorf Skills Forum
Rosie Wickert	Assistant to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), University of Technology, Sydney
Francesca Beddie	Executive Director, Adult Learners' Australia
John Cross	Research Manager, Adult Learners' Australia
Peter Freebody	Vice-Dean, Research Methods, Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice, National Institute of Education, Singapore
Phillipa Mclean	Manager, Strategic Planning and Development, Access Education and Training department, CAE (formerly Council for Adult Education)

Unfortunately, several individuals in the areas of literacy measurement, Indigenous literacy and English as a second language were unable to contribute within the time limit available. It is to be hoped that any further debate will invite response from other representatives working in these crucial areas.

## Questions

The core questions were:

- 1 Leaving aside formal definitions, what do you understand by the term 'literacy'?
- 2 What kinds of literacy are becoming more important today? Why?
- 3 What kinds of literacy do you consider are most important? Why?
- 4 To what extent is literacy situation-specific? (or, put another way, are there any literacy skills or understandings that you consider common to all situations?)
- 5 Consider the following propositions drawn from current thinking about literacy:
  - ◆ People's literacy needs change over time.
  - ◆ There is a difference between 'school literacy' and other literacies.

- ◆ Literacy is gained informally.
- ◆ Some literacies are accorded more respect and are more influential than others.
- ◆ Literacies become more or less dominant according to society's needs.

What are the implications of such thinking for government policies about literacy?

The supplementary questions were:

**a** workplace related:

What does it mean to be 'workplace literate'? Is there a minimum or basic set of skills/understandings that a person needs in order to be considered 'workplace literate'?

Are there multiple literacies in the workplace? If so, what are these?

How transferable are the skills associated with 'workplace literacy'?

Which literacy skills related to the workplace are currently most highly valued by employers? Why?

**b** social justice/social inclusion

Are different literacies more or less important to particular groups in society?

What literacies are most important to an Indigenous population?

What implications does the concept of situation-specific and multiple literacies have for approaches to literacy for particular groups in society?

**c** measuring literacy

Does the concept of situation-specific literacies invalidate the notion of defining general levels of literacy, benchmarking and measurement?

If the concept of situation-specific literacies is accepted, then can these be benchmarked and measured within specific situations, such as within the workplace?

Do the new ways of thinking about literacy undermine the notion of 'illiteracy'?

**d** education and training; policy-making

If we accept that literacy is situation-specific and multiple, what implications does this have for:

- ◆ the learner?
- ◆ educators
- ◆ current approaches to education and training

**e** conceptualising/historical

Graff (1997) has argued that literacy can be understood only in terms of its historical development. What does this historical development tell us about future developments in literacy?

Graff has previously challenged what he called the 'literacy myth'; are there 'literacy myths' that exist today?



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ISBN I 920895 77 9 print edition  
ISBN I 920895 78 7 web edition