

*The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy.*

David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (Eds.).

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Literacy may be important to some, but is literacy important to everyone? Today 100 million young people have no opportunities for schooling, and approximately one billion more youth and adults do not possess basic literacy skills or the ability to read and write (Farrell, Chapter 28). When one considers that the international community has passed the target year of 2000 that was set to establish universal access to free primary education and that we are well past the halfway target of 2015 declared as the UN Literacy Decade, the question must be asked: Can the mandate of literacy for all ever be attained? (Farrell, Chapter 28). In the light of these vexing facts and statistics, the contributors to this volume argue that literacy should be important to everyone.

What have we learned from history about the origins and role of literacy, and what are the role, nature, and consequences of literacy in the 21st century? Is literacy merely a set of skills or competences, or is it understood as much broader than this? What does it mean to be literate today? Are reading, writing, and language understood and valued equally in every culture and society? Should they be? What insights have we gained from the field of neuroscience about the functions of the “reading brain”? What is our understanding of “different literacies,” and what effect has information technology had on changing literacy practices? Who is accountable, and whose responsibility is it to prepare children and adults for the increasing literacy demands of the 21st century? Has progress been made in the ongoing debate about the standards of literacy, and where are we in promoting universal literacy and in establishing realistic literacy policies?

Many of these queries are explored and addressed across a wide range of topics that examine the multifaceted dimensions of literacy in *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* edited by David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance. Olson and Torrance have collaborated once again to nurture and enhance our understanding of the nature of literacy and what it means to be literate. In this recent endeavor, the editors have rallied prominent and celebrated international scholars who have made significant contributions to understanding literacy to provide a broader perspective of literacy from disciplines as diverse as anthropology, education, history, linguistics, literature, neuroscience, psychology, and sociology.

Olson and Torrance’s edited handbook examines literacy not from a narrow prescriptive pedagogical approach, but rather from a broad theoretical research-based approach in an effort to provide an interdisciplinary inquiry into

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literacy as a field of knowledge. Their main premise is that views of literacy have changed and must be studied, analyzed, and theorized from another, much broader perspective than in the past if we are to understand the role and nature of literacy set against the backdrop of social, political, and cultural influences and practices. In this handbook the editors and contributing authors refer to this change in their understanding of literacy studies as a transformation, meaning an alteration, a changeover, or a shift in how we think about and view the roles of reading, writing, and language including the many dimensions and functions of literacy evident across cultures and changing societies. The main focus is that literacy is important, is changing, and that we can no longer think about it as in the past. Literacy can no longer be ignored as it has become “part of the discourse in all of the human sciences” (Brockmeier & Olson, p. 17).

Although numerous publications are available on various aspects of literacy from other disciplines, the strength of this handbook is that it defines literacy as a field of knowledge and offers interdisciplinary research and theoretical perspectives on literacy in one comprehensive reference. Each chapter provides developing areas of scholarly analysis, research, and theory in the study of literacy from disciplines other than the more traditional educational and psychological fields and explores their overlapping relationships, promising contributions, and future research ideas in the field of literacy.

*The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* is a hefty handbook of 602 pages organized into five major sections structured into themes. The five themes presented as transformations symbolize the revised conceptualizations of literacy as a field of knowledge. The five transformations that constitute the major themes are: Literacy as a Scientific Subject; Literacy and Language; Literacy and Literature; Literacy and Society; and Literacy and Education.

Given the space available for this review, I explicitly mention a few chapters and authors for the points I wish to make. All the chapters are enlightening and offer a unique perspective on literacy. In chapter 1, Olson and Brockmeier introduce the first transformation, Literacy as a Scientific Subject, and build the understanding that literacy is not simply a topic, school subject, or set of skills to be learned and developed, but rather a perspective or “episteme ... more as a frame rather than a content” (p. 8). In describing literacy as an episteme, the authors set the epistemological context for the discussions in the other chapters as they attempt to bring intellectual awareness to and provide a spotlight on the study of reading, writing, and language as a scientific discourse from a variety of disciplines.

In the second transformation, Literacy and Language, the contributing authors delve deeper into our understanding that reading and writing are not merely a set of basic skills to be developed, but a complex form of communication. In the chapters in this section, authors examine and explore the communicative nature and potential of literacy. In chapter 2, Daniels, a scholar on world writing systems, provides a fascinating account of writing systems over the last five millennia and the languages they represent. Examining what it means to be a literate language-user from a linguistic domain, Berman and Ravid in chapter 6 highlight research findings that reveal how the promise of becoming an accomplished language-user is apparent in the interface between the writ-

ten mode and the expository genre that develops along a continuum from grade school to high school and beyond. In chapter 7, Snow and Uccelli explore the ongoing challenges in developing meaningful instruction for children to acquire the academic language skills necessary to manage the multitude of literacy tasks and disciplines outside language arts. In expanding our knowledge of what it means to be literate, we gain insight into reading development from the field of neuroscience. In chapter 8, Goswami presents neuroimaging studies that identify the core brain areas typical in reading acquisition and presents evidence to support the phonological areas that are activated in the brain and critical to reading that are similar across languages and shown to be underactivated in the adult dyslexic brain. Chapter 9 presents a complex discussion of language and literacy and brain functions from a cognitive neuroscience perspective, as well as empirical findings that confirm the differences in brain functioning between individuals who are literate and those who are deemed to be illiterate.

The third transformation, *Literacy and Literature*, constitutes a shift from the inquiry of reading and writing as acquired skills to the social practices and consequences of varied literacies. How readers engage in text depends on the circumstances, demands, and expectations placed on them as readers. In chapter 10, Long discusses ways of reading, shares her reading story, and reflects on the cultural beliefs and practices that shaped her as a reader. Larsson follows this line of thinking in chapter 13 and provides an historical account of Swedish women's reading habits, with a glimpse at women's early experiences with the popular novel and their perceptions and sense of identity. In thinking about literacy and literatures, Norris and Phillips raise our awareness of what it means to be scientifically literate and the need for science educators to provide the necessary instruction to help students learn to read and write when the content is science. In his chapter on literacy and video games, Gee teaches how practices in popular culture that facilitate "game-like learning" are so compelling for students and how video games can teach educators a great deal about meaningful literacy and learning in school.

The fourth transformation, *Literacy and Society*, presents an alternate view of the connection between literacy and social development. Chapters 18-23 reveal how the implications of literacy can be radically diverse in varied cultures and societies. Contrary to our beliefs about the power of the written word, Thomas' investigation of the origins of literacy reveals that the ability to speak in public gatherings was far more important for social advancement in ancient Greece than was writing. Linguists Wang, Tsai, and Wang trace the history of Chinese literacy, its effect on Han and non-Han cultures, and the development of the Hanzi writing system. Contributing to the discussions from an anthropological perspective on literacy and social change, Haeri writes a fascinating and powerful vignette about language and literacy in "Elephant in the Room" and explores low literacy rates in the Arab world with a discussion of an ethnographic study of urban lower-middle-class children in the Arab world. She acknowledges that literacy problems are complex when the use of the official classical Arabic language (the language of religion) for instruction (textbooks) differs from the various vernacular forms of the mother tongue of Arab children in everyday life. Haeri's ethnographic study raises the question:

when the official language is not the language of everyday communication, “whose language is it”? (p. 423).

Contributing authors in chapters 24-31 examine the fifth transformation, Literacy and Education. They provide a new understanding of how children and adults acquire literacy, starting with Chartier’s fascinating historical perspective on teaching literacy in the 16th-20th centuries in Western Europe. In chapter 25, Tochinsky proposes that acquiring literacy is not an additive process of learning a set of skills, but a domain of knowledge witnessed from the early beginnings of children “interpreting and creating marks” on a page (p. 468). Graton and Pratt discuss becoming literate from a sociocultural view and the importance of myriad early literate practices in the home that contribute to literacy development. Farrell addresses literacy as a human rights issue and highlights pedagogies used in several programs being implemented around the world to eradicate illiteracy. Both Sticht and Wagner in chapters 29 and 30 respectively address the global issue of adult literacy. Sticht attends to adult literacy programs in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States and identifies five areas for reform to make the programs legitimate and more successful. Wagner argues the case for the role of information and communication (ICT) to support the development of adult literacy.

In the final chapter, Olson provides a summary of the handbook through an investigation of the politics and policies embedded in literacy practices. His expressed hope is that with our revised and deeper understandings of literacy and what it means to be literate, standard educational practices and realistic literacy policies will follow.

One of the most important messages for educators and researchers in the handbook is reflected throughout: that literacy is important from a variety of disciplines, and these perspectives contribute to new conceptualizations of the changing nature of literacy as a field of knowledge. The handbook provides a rich source of information that addresses an extended range of topics in an in-depth study of literacy from an impressive group of influential and renowned international scholars. Without question, the handbook does accomplish its goal, although one criticism is worth mentioning. The chapters in section IV are particularly fascinating, especially chapter 22 on literacy and language in the Arab world. Unfortunately, this section is shorter than the others, and a chapter or two on family literacy in diverse cultures would have rounded out the section. One feature unique to the handbook is how it is structured into the five themes, allowing one to read a theme at a time and in any order. I commend editors David Olson and Nancy Torrance for their wisdom in providing a new vision of the nature of literacy from such diverse disciplines in one comprehensive handbook.

Recent publications on research such as those on literacy and diversity, adolescent literacy, and new literacies and from disciplines such as sociolinguistics, information sciences, and computer-mediated communications may compete for similar audiences. *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy* stands alone as an interdisciplinary inquiry and an informed addition to the study of literacy. The handbook will probably be embraced by a diverse audience in addition to the community of researchers in the disciplines represented. I recommend that this significant contribution to the existing resources on the nature and

study of literacy be used by university professors of literacy as a text for graduate courses in language and literacy. Undergraduates pursuing advanced studies in literacy should also read it. Parts of it could be used in professional learning communities for teacher researchers who are keen and enthusiastic about the study of literacy and wish to challenge their thinking and enliven their dialogue about the nature and changing role of literacy. Beyond this, several chapters of the handbook may benefit senior government officials responsible for developing international literacy standards and policies. After reading *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*, one cannot help but ask the question, How can literacy not be important to everyone?