New literacy practices as meaning-making practices[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the 21st century, literacy increasingly includes understanding the roles of **digital media** and technology in literacy. In 1996, the New London Group coined (invented) the term “multiliteracies” or “new literacies” to describe a modern view of literacy that reflected multiple communication forms and contexts of cultural and linguistic diversity within a globalized society. They defined multiliteracies as a combination of multiple ways of communicating and making meaning, including such modes as visual, audio, spatial, behavioral, and gestural (New London Group, 1996). Most of the text’s students come across today are digital (like this textbook!). Instead of books and magazines, students are reading blogs and text messages.

For a short video on the importance of digital literacy, watch [The New Media Literacies](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEHcGAsnBZE).

The National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE, 2019) makes it clear that our definitions of literacy must continue to evolve and grow ([NCTE definition of digital literacy](https://ncte.org/statement/nctes-definition-literacy-digital-age/)).

“Literacy has always been a collection of communicative and sociocultural practices shared among communities. As society and technology change, so does literacy. The world demands that a literate person possess and intentionally apply a wide range of skills, competencies, and dispositions. These literacies are interconnected, dynamic, and malleable (can be changed). As in the past, they are inextricably linked with histories, narratives, life possibilities, and social trajectories of all individuals and groups. Active, successful participants in a global society must be able to:

* + Participate effectively and critically in a networked world ;
	+ Explore and engage critically and thoughtfully across a wide variety of inclusive texts and tools/modalities ;
	+ Consume, curate (select), and create actively across contexts ;
	+ Advocate (support) for equitable access to and accessibility of texts, tools, and information ;
	+ Build and sustain (maintain) intentional global and cross-cultural connections and relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought ;
	+ Promote culturally sustaining communication and recognize the bias and privilege present in the interactions ;
	+ Examine the rights, responsibilities, and ethical implications of the use and creation of information ;
	+ Determine how and to what extent texts and tools amplify one’s own and others’ narratives as well as counterproductive narratives ;
	+ Recognize and honor the multilingual literacy identities and culture experiences individuals bring to learning environments, and provide opportunities to promote, amplify, and encourage these variations of language (e.g., dialect, jargon, and register).”

**Socio-cultural context** refers to the idea that language does not exist in isolation and is closely linked to the culture and society in which it is used and taught. Activities that can raise awareness of socio-cultural context include using stories from different countries, analyzing newspaper headlines, and looking at slang and idiomatic language.

In other words, literacy is not just the ability to read and write. It is also being able to effectively use digital technology to find and analyze information. Students who are digitally literate know how to do research, find reliable sources, and make judgments about what they read online and in print. Next, we will learn more about digital literacy.

* **Culturally sustaining**: the pedagogical preservation of the cultural and linguistic competence of young people pertaining to their communities of origin while simultaneously affording dominant-culture competence.
* **Bias**: a tendency to believe that some people, ideas, etc., are better than others, usually resulting in unfair treatment.
* **Privilege**: a right or benefit that is given to some people and not to others.
* **Unproductive narrative**: negative commonly held beliefs such as “all students from low-income backgrounds will struggle in school.” (Narratives are phrases or ideas that are repeated over and over and become “shared narratives.” You can spot them in common expressions and stories that almost everyone knows and holds as ingrained values or beliefs.)

Literacy in the digital age

The Iowa Core recognizes that today, literacy includes technology. The goal for students who graduate from the public education system in Iowa is:

“Each Iowa student will be empowered with the technological knowledge and skills to learn effectively and live productively. This vision, developed by the Iowa Core 21st Century Skills Committee, reflects the fact that Iowans in the 21st century live in a global environment marked by a high use of technology, giving citizens and workers the ability to collaborate and make individual contributions as never before. Iowa’s students live in a media-suffused environment, marked by access to an abundance of information and rapidly changing technological tools useful for critical thinking and problem-solving processes. Therefore, technological literacy supports preparation of students as global citizens capable of self-directed learning in preparation for an ever-changing world” (Iowa Core Standards 21st Century Skills, n.d.).

[…]

Literacy in any context is defined as the ability “ to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information in order to function in a knowledge society” (ICT Literacy Panel, 2002). “ When we teach only for facts (specifics)… rather than for how to go beyond facts, we teach students how to get out of date ” (Sternberg, 2008). This statement is particularly significant when applied to technology literacy. The Iowa essential concepts for technology literacy reflect broad, universal processes and skills.

Unlike the previous generations, learning in the digital age is marked using rapidly evolving technology, a deluge of information, and a highly networked global community (Dede, 2010). In such a dynamic environment, learners need skills beyond the basic cognitive ability to consume and process language. To understand the characteristics of the digital age, and what this means for how people learn in this new and changing landscape, one may turn to the evolving discussion of literacy or, as one might say now, of digital literacy. The history of literacy contextualizes digital literacy and illustrates changes in literacy over time. By looking at literacy as an evolving historical phenomenon, we can glean the fundamental characteristics of the digital age. These characteristics in turn illuminate the skills needed to take advantage of digital environments. The following discussion is an overview of digital literacy, its essential components, and why it is important for learning in the digital age.

Literacy is often considered a skill or competency. Children and adults alike can spend years developing the appropriate skills for encoding and decoding information. Over the course of thousands of years, literacy has become much more common and widespread, with a global literacy rate ranging from 81% to 90% depending on age and gender (UNESCO, 2016). From a time when literacy was the domain of an elite few, it has grown to include huge swaths of the global population. There are several reasons for this, not the least of which are some of the advantages the written word can provide. Kaestle (1985) tells us that “literacy makes it possible to preserve information as a snapshot in time, allows for recording, tracking and remembering information, and sharing information more easily across distances among others” (p. 16). In short, literacy led “to the replacement of myth by history and the replacement of magic by skepticism and science.”

If literacy involves the skills of reading and writing, digital literacy requires the ability to extend those skills to effectively take advantage of the digital world (American Library Association [ALA], 2013). More general definitions express digital literacy as the ability to read and understand information from digital sources as well as to create information in various digital formats (Bawden, 2008; Gilster, 1997; Tyner, 1998; UNESCO, 2004). Developing digital skills allows digital learners to manage a vast array of rapidly changing information and is key to both learning and working in the evolving digital landscape (Dede, 2010; Koltay, 2011; Mohammadyari & Singh, 2015). As such, it is important for people to develop certain competencies specifically for handling digital content.

1. <https://iastate.pressbooks.pub/teachingearlyliteracy/chapter/what-is-literacy-multiple-perspectives-on-literacy/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)