How You Can Use This Booklet

This booklet will enable readers to:

- Learn about the literacy challenge and the United Nations Literacy Decade Plan of Action.
- Recognize the potential of ICT as a tool in addressing literacy challenges.
- Learn from successful literacy projects being implemented in countries in the Asia-Pacific region and other regions of the world.
- Develop effective strategies for using ICT as a tool in action plans to achieve the Literacy Decade Plan of Action goals.

What is Literacy?

While all approaches to literacy are related to the ability to understand and communicate via written text, there is no standard international definition of literacy that captures all its facets. Over the past 60 years our understanding of literacy has expanded and the definition has subsequently evolved. This evolving definition has in turn led to changes in approaches to literacy education.

Definitions of Literacy

In 1958, in an attempt to provide a simple definition that would enable the comparison of international data on literacy levels, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defined a literate person is one who can “read and write, with understanding, a short simple statement about his or her everyday life”.

According to this view of literacy, people were divided into two distinct categories: literate and illiterate. Later, recognition of the diversity of needs of learners led to the identification of a range of literacy levels. Following this shift, assessment of literacy focused on determining whether people have a level of literacy adequate for their needs.

It became clear that literacy campaigns must be more than merely about the acquisition of technical skills and need to also take into account the context and motivations of learners.

This new understanding of literacy led to the idea of “functional literacy”. A definition for this was suggested in 1978 as follows: “A person is functionally literate who can engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning of his (or her) group and community and also for enabling him (or her) to continue to use reading, writing and calculations for his own and the community’s development.”
With the understanding that literacy is a set of practices which are defined by their cultural context, rather than as merely technical skills, came awareness of the range of uses that literacy skills have in everyday life, from the exercise of political rights to self-instruction. This led to recognition in the 1980s and 1990s of the need for context-sensitive and learner-centred forms of literacy education, as well as the need for creating environments that are conducive to literacy.

While aware of the complexity and diversity of the concept of literacy, UNESCO is also sensitive to the need to have internationally-comparable literacy rates. With these factors in mind, UNESCO’s Education for All 2000 Assessment revised the earlier definition of literacy as follows, “The ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement related to one’s daily life. It involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, and often also includes basic arithmetic skills (numeracy)”. This definition has been adopted and adapted by many countries; however the different methods used by different countries for measuring literacy continue to create difficulties in making cross-country comparisons.

The standard definition identified in 2000 does not explicitly take into account the diversity of languages in the world. While a person may be able to read and write, this definition of literacy does not specify whether the language they can read and write in is their mother tongue. It is worth noting that when literacy programmes are provided only in a country’s “official” language, these programmes can undermine the survival of minority languages. UNESCO recognizes that literacy education in mother tongues can not only foster the survival of minority languages but can also motivate learners to gain literacy skills and, by making literacy more relevant, support the creation of a literacy-conducive environment.

Recognizing that “people acquire and apply literacy for different purposes in different situations”\(^3\), and that literacy is not uniform, but is culturally and linguistically diverse, UNESCO today views the concept of “literacy” as a plural notion. UNESCO recognizes that skills for written expression and comprehension are related to particular contexts and languages, and that the value of these skills lies in the ability to apply them in a beneficial way.\(^4\)
New Uses of the Word “literacy”

The word “literacy” is often used today as a substitute for the word “ability” or “competency”. For example, “computer literacy” is the ability to use computers, and access and create information through a computer.

Such uses should not be confused with the term “literacy” as we use it here, i.e. the skills related to reading, writing and communicating in the written form.

Examples of other uses of the word “literacy” include:

- Information literacy: The skills required to organize and search for information, while also analyzing that information.
- Critical literacy: the ability to engage in critical thinking, and judge the intention, content and possible effects of written material.
- Mobile literacy: The ability to use mobile technology, such as a mobile phone and its non-voice features.
- Media literacy and research literacy: The ability to be a discerning reader and the ability to find various types of information.
- Cultural literacy: the ability to understand cultural, social and ideological values in a given context.
- Legal literacy: the knowledge of basic legal rights and how to protect those rights.
- Visual literacy: the interpretation of images, signs, pictures and non-verbal (body) language.

While the abilities listed here, such as computer “literacy” and information “literacy”, are necessary skills to cultivate in emerging knowledge societies, the ability to read and write is a prerequisite for gaining many of these abilities. Furthermore, studies indicate that although learning to read and write requires significant guidance and a degree of formalized education, learning to use a computer and other modern technologies can be an intuitive process. The “Hole-in-the-Wall” study, for example, which set up computers in public spaces in slum areas of India, found that curious children in these areas became proficient in browsing the Internet and using certain computer programs within days, without any formal teaching. This example demonstrates that, for children at least, it is possible to gain basic computer skills without formalized assistance. This implies that the various forms of “literacy” associated with the rise in use of new forms of ICT, such as “mobile literacy”, do not require the same degree of emphasis and investment that learning to read and write requires.