Cape Peninsula University of Technology
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ACADEMIC LITERACIES

STUDENT LEARNING UNIT

In order to be self-directed learner with high order thinking and a great sense of autonomy one needs to acquire or enhance his or her academic literacies.

The ability to use language to meet the demands of tertiary education is called "academic literacy" (Wiedeman 2018). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) state that being literate involves much more than simply knowing how to operate the language system. They believe the cultural and critical facets of knowledge integral to being literate are considerable.

What does being "literacy" actually mean?

The classical definition of literacy 'the ability to read and write' presupposes that literacy is something individual, static, universal, and solely cognitive (Yayli 2009).

The meaning of such literacy is restricted to paper-based, formalized, and standardized forms of language that only reflects the dominant language and culture (Sang 2017). However, according to Keefe and Copeland (2011), literacy is not a trait that resides solely in the individual person.

Put differently, literacy is neither absolute nor monolithic: it is culturally constructed and contextually situated –embedded like cognition itself in particularised activity (Friesen 2014).

Literacy—of whatever type—has consequences only as it acts together with a large number of other social factors, including political and economic conditions, social structure, and local ideologies (Gee 2008).

What does it matter to be academic literate?

Wiedeman (2007) defined academic literacy in terms of:

- Understanding a range of academic vocabulary in context;
- Interpreting the use of metaphors and idioms and perceiving connotations;
- Understanding relations between different parts of texts, and being aware of the logical development of an academic text;
- Interpreting different text types (genres) and having sensitivity for the meaning conveyed to the audience;
- Interpreting, using and producing information presented in graphic or visual format;
- Making distinction between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments;
- Distinguishing between cause and effects, classifying, categorising and handling data and drawing comparisons;
- Being able to see sequence, order and being able to do numerical estimations and computations;
- Knowing what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolating from information by making inferences, and applying the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand;
- Understanding the communicative function of various ways of expressions in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing); and
- Making meaning beyond the level of the sentence.

Whilst the above competencies are crucial, but much more needs to be understood in terms of acquisition and numbers of literacy abilities – academic literacies, criticality, inquiry, and value of technology in education.

What is the value of academic literacies in the 21st century?

Literacy always take a plural form 'literacies' (Gee 2015; Street 2003). Street (2003) insists that the plural form literacies has a strategic importance. Gee (2015) posit that there are many different 'literacies' (legal literacy, gamer literacy, country music literacy, academic literacy of many different types), and reading and writing are determined by the values and practices of different social and cultural groups (Gee 2015).

Lillis, Harrington, Lea and Mitchell (2015:4) define Academic Literacies as a "critical approach to the researching and teaching of writing and literacy and to the role and potential of these activities for individual meaning making and academic knowledge construction in higher education." For these authors "Academic Literacies" draws attention to:

- the importance, for research and pedagogy, of adopting socially situated accounts of writing and text production.
- to the ways in which power and identity (at the levels of student, teacher, institution, discipline) are inscribed in literacy practices, and
- to the need to explore the possibilities for adopting transformative approaches to academic writing, which includes working to extend the range of semiotic resources—linguistic, rhetorical, technological—that are legitimized in the academy of the twenty-first century.

Lim (2018) posit that the changing nature of the communicative landscape wrought by new technologies is accentuating the need to broaden our definition of literacy. This includes, but limited to, multiliteracies, multimodality and digital literacies. See the table for their definitions.

CONCEPT	CHARACTERISATION
MULTILITERACIES	Any technology, including writing, is a cultural form, a social product whose shape and influence depend upon prior political and ideological factors (Gee 2008). Actually, the new literacy approach of the post-structuralism underscores the significance of texts in context, differing values, meanings and the notion of multiliteracies (Yayli 2009). Perry (2012) maintains that only through this pedagogy of multiliteracies can literacy education raise critical consciousness and ultimately transform practice.
MULTIMODALITY	Covid-19 has deeply challenged traditional teaching and learning methods used at our universities, and it has seriously redefined how pedagogy must be enacted – focusing us speedily into adopting the remote forms of learning that blend traditional textbook and digital modes. Multimodality implies that meaning-making occurs through a variety of communicative channels "in which written linguistic modes of meaning are part and parcel of visual, audio, and spatial patterns of meaning" (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000:5).
DIGITAL LITERACIES	Digital literacy is defined as making use of technologies to find, use and disseminate information. Each discipline has its way of looking at it. Albeit incorporating media and technology digital literacy focuses more on literacies, research and information dissemination. Students must learn use search engines, data bases, e-mails, social media, Learner Management Systems, Office 365 apps, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Youtube and blogs, etc.

QUIZ ?

Define the concept of "academic literacies."

What are the challenges faced by students and lecturers in terms of implementing multimodal literacies?

What does "being critical of knowledge" mean?

What is the relationship between criticality and multiliteracies?

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AUTHORS
Thembinkosi Mtonjeni
Puleng Sefalane-Nkohla