

The Research Brief



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Demonstrating a Commitment to Literacy, Inquiry, and Reflection

Melissa Burgess

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn." -Alvin Toffler

Question In what ways can educators demonstrate a commitment to literacy, inquiry, and reflection?

Literacy

Educational institutions at all levels are expected to prepare literate citizens. However, what does it mean exactly to be literate in the 21st century? Many times people often relate literacy to reading and writing through books, newspapers and other printed resources (Niess, Lee, & Kajder, 2008). Further, tools such as pens, pencils, paper, word processing and presentational software serve as tools to communicate information and ideas. In short, learning literacy in today's world requires learners to not only be able to read and write, it requires them to "use the symbols or languages [and] learn to use constructions of reading and writing in addition to learning the content that is being communicated" (p. 160). Leu et al., (2004) coined the term, "new literacies," to describe these overarching skills that extend reading and writing. New literacies build upon the foundational literacies that have always been taught in schools to prepare students for the effective use of books, paper, and pencils. However, the new literacies go beyond these foundational literacies to include new reading,

writing, viewing, and communication skills required by the many new ICTs that continue to appear in individuals daily lives. (Leu et al., p. 496) Furthering this notion of new literacy, McLeod (2008) posited that there are multiple literacies that education in the 21st century should specifically include:

- **Ecoliteracy** - knowledge of nature and how we can sustain it
- **Cyberliteracy** - knowledge of not only to passively use computer technologies, but also to engage with them critically
- **Physical Fitness and Health Literacy** - knowledge needed to promote healthy, active living
- **Globalization & Multicultural Literacy** - knowledge of the global and transnational interactions of people, shared cultures, information and technology, education, economy, ecological management and value systems
- **Social/Emotional Literacy** - the ability to communicate about relationships and to access and interpret social and emotional language
- **Media Literacy** - to critically think and create a wide variety of messages using image, language, and sound; the ability to locate, access, analyze, evaluate, manipulate, and communicate information effectively using a variety of digital formats
- **Financial Literacy** - the ability to make informed judgments and effective

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Dr. Melissa Burgess is Clinical Professor in Curriculum and Instruction, Sam Houston State University. You may contact her at mlb024@shsu.edu

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make informed judgments and effective decision on the use and management of money

- The Arts and Creativity Literacy - to work with imagination and with purpose (Facer & Williamson, 2002) to judge the value of their own contributions and those of others and to fashion critical responses across all subjects in the curriculum. Our youth possess the imagination and creativity to combine print, visual and digital modes in combinations and it is schools that should harness this creativity (Walsh, 2007).

Inquiry

Very much a visionary, Dewey (1933) recognized that learning is not an individualistic process; it is the fusing of learner interest with the interests of society. Still applicable today, Dewey described four primary interests of the learner: (a) the instinctive desire to find things out; (b) in conversation, the propensity learners have to communicate; (c) in construction, the enjoyment in creating things; and (d) the desire for artistic expression.

Diverse learners can greatly benefit from learning environments rich in literacy and inquiry when following these suggestions:

- Present text, ideas, and strategies in different ways (visual, auditory, oral, kinesthetic) (Tomlinson, 2004.)
- Break down literacy and content instruction into smaller chunks (Tomlinson, 2004.)
- Provide extended talk time, particularly for those who are learning English or who speak a non-standard dialect of English. Provide opportunities for diverse learners to report orally about group or partner discussions (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004.)
- Model and provide instruction in academic English (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004.)
- Talk with students individually, asking them questions about what they are learning and encourage them to explain and clarify their thoughts (Klinger & Vaughn, 2004.)

Reflection

"The importance of learning about one's students is paralleled by the importance of knowing oneself" (Banks et al., 2005, p. 266). Through reflective practices, educators can grow and develop toward making their own assumptions about teaching and learning. Additionally, learners can also grow and develop through activities that elicit self-reflection, thereby establishing a habit of self-critiquing, self-insight, and self-revision (Merseth & Koppich, 2000.) Reflection, whether by educator or learner, provides the opportunity to *unlearn* and re-learn, thus manipulating and molding knowledge in ways that align with our society's current needs.

Tying It All Together

As educators, it is very important to model a commitment to literacy, inquiry and reflective practices as well as to demonstrate that importance through learning opportunities for our students. Through an awareness of the multiple literacies today's learners face in the 21st century, educators can develop instruction that promotes inquiry into these areas, and then further allows for reflection and potential re-learning.

Additional Resources:

[*Preparing teachers for a changing world*](#) (Eds. Linda Darling-Hammond & John Bransford) - This book is an excellent resource addressing what teachers today should know and be able to do. ISBN: 13 978-0-7879-9634 -5

"Cyberliteracy: Toward a New Internet Consciousness." [*Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet with Awareness*](#). United States of America: Yale University Press, 2003.

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