



GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR THE USE OF TERMINOLOGY IN ADULT LITERACY



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What does an influx of low-skilled immigrants mean for the economy?



Trimming away at illiteracy one hair cut at a time

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When it comes to reading, experts say Louisiana has a problem.

With a 20 percent illiteracy rate amongst adults, the state is faring worse than the rest of the nation (15% illiteracy rate), according to the organization proLiteracy.org.

Why do we need guiding principles?

As is the case with many educational topics, adult literacy is something claimed by many, including politicians and the media. This means that a great many of the statements written (or spoken) about adult literacy are made by those who, potentially, do not have great knowledge or experience of this area, and who may potentially underestimate its complexity. There are several problems with and challenges around the use of terminology concerning adult literacy needs and provision, within ELINET and beyond.

Precision

Much of the language that is commonly used to talk about adult literacy lacks precision and it is not always clear what is intended by certain terms. For example, what does 'low literacy' mean? What should we understand when we hear that someone 'lacks the literacy to function in daily life'?

Respect

Another problem is that the language we use can be offensive. If we use the term 'lowskilled' to mean 'low literacy' we are equating a lack of literacy skills with a lack of other skills, with a lack of any skills.

About whom are we actually talking?

Another challenge is the way we talk about 'people with low literacy skills' without distinguishing who these people are and how they may relate to our advocacy or policy point. We may be talking about adult literacy learners, or we may be talking about the wider population of adults with a variety of literacy skills.

Different traditions, different expertise

A further challenge is posed by the fact that adult literacy experts come from such a range of disciplinary or professional backgrounds. Some are psychologists, others applied linguists; some identify with research, others with teaching; some have focused their teaching or research primarily on children and moved towards a focus on adults, others began with a focus on adults, but have perhaps moved from adult language teaching or the broader field of adult education.

Working across many languages

Within ELINET we have the additional challenge of our inter-language working. We are working across many languages, with most people translating to and from other languages into our common working language of English. This makes terminology use in our context even more complicated.

- **What is literacy?**
- **The Literate-Illiterate Binary**
- **The spectrum and its invisible dividing lines**

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

1. We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for **terminology that provides precision appropriate to communicative purpose.**

Each time we have to use a term, we need to think about the purpose for which it is needed and the degree of precision that is needed to fulfil that purpose. For some purposes we need less precision, but for others, a lack of precision could be misleading or dangerous, leading to statements, even policy, being made on assumptions and media hyperbole rather than evidence.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

2. We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for **terminology that communicates transparently and simply, as appropriate to audience, purpose and context.**

Problems accessing texts are only partly to do with the reader; it is also incumbent on the writer to make their words readable. Bureaucratic organisations are often accused of producing 'inconsiderate texts':

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

3. We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for **terminology that is respectful.**

Literacy practitioners are often working with people who have been told that they are failures - unintelligent or incapable of learning with nothing to offer society.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

4. We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for **terminology that is positive (where possible avoids contributing to a deficit model).**

A deficit model of literacy sees people with limited literacy only in terms of the skills they lack or what they cannot do.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

5. We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for **terminology that recognises that people are not at levels, skills are.**

Literacy use is lifelong and life-wide, and literacy development is lifelong and life-wide. Just as individual literacy skills and practices change over time and across contexts, cultural literacy expectations and conventions change too.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

6. We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for **terminology that recognises that 'a beginner reader [or writer] is not a beginner thinker'**.

'someone with a limited command of literacy is not necessarily someone with limited thinking or other skills'.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

7. We propose that when we write or talk about literacy we aim for **terminology that is appropriate to linguistic and cultural context, as well as to audience and purpose.**

Every language has its own lexicon which is used by practitioners, researchers and policy makers to refer to literacy. These terms may or may not have direct translations into English. Some languages will offer more precision than English for particular concepts.

Our uses of terminology will always be within larger texts, interactions or discourses and we aim for these to:

- recognize the core tension between the desire for precision and the complexity of literacy;
- acknowledge the potential need for different terms to be used for different audiences while working towards convergence - part of a wider role of educating the public and policy-makers;
- take account of the fact that terms created to describe groups will be applied to individuals - the terms we use will be taken out of context and we should attempt to anticipate this;
- recognize that individuals and their skills and practices shift and develop over the lifecourse and across different life domains - literacy development is lifelong and lifewide.

Thank you.

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