cultura & psyché: Journal of Cultural Psychology (2023) 4:1–10
https://doi.org/10.1007/s43638-023-00082-2

EDITORIAL

Multiplicities of (Il)literacy. An introduction

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Received: 17 October 2023 / Accepted: 1 November 2023 / Published online: 20 November 2023
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Few ideas have travelled the globe as successfully as the idea that literacy is a universal standard and a basic need, and right. People's lifeworlds are everywhere shaped by written signs and numbers and by forms and text messages. Almost all professional work seems to rely on the capacity to read and write. At a minimum, people who have to deposit their wages in a bank account or sign a work contract must be concerned with their capacities to interpret written documents and cope with the challenges they pose. Routine activities such as paying a bill, receiving money, filling out forms, accompanying children to school, and reading traffic signs have become highly enmeshed in a global world of literacy. In addition, digital literacy has entered everyday life around the globe: consider, for instance, getting a driver's licence and the role the computer plays in this process today; or the many uses of mobile phones, including pictorial communication. And finally, global schooling campaigns, such as the UNESCO's Millennium Goal of "Education for All" (UNESCO 2010), have implied that the global population is leaving illiteracy behind.

1 Dynamics, multiplicity, relationality: Illiteracising and literacising

A common understanding seems to exist that progress can only take place by "literacising" the world population—making it literate or taking steps towards that goal. This understanding depends on implicit spatial assumptions that place deficiencies in literacy in the Global South and literacy in the Global North. This spatial narra-

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tive is complemented by a temporal "modernisation tale" that assumes a primordial illiteracy followed by a more or less continuous ongoing process of literacising, in which societies become more and more literate and (ideally) illiteracy is eventually completely eradicated. Finally, one must underline that in these contexts the term literacy usually refers only to the written word (which of course is a very *specific* form of literacy) and does not take other forms of literacy into account.

Many arguments could be made against this simplistic optimism. For instance, literacy courses and social initiatives to help people to deal with literacy-based bureaucracies are not only offered in the Global South but also the Global North. This suggests that it might not be so easy to eradicate illiteracy, even in countries with a comprehensive and state-controlled schooling system. Of course, one could argue that such countries (like Germany) might still need courses to integrate non-literacised migrants, but that is only a part of the picture. As official statistics and empirical studies show, a significant number of people in every country seem to have been *left behind* by global literacy politics. When it comes to official statistics, Benin is only one example (LDC profile Benin 2021); for an empirical study and analysis in the Global North, there is the Level-One (LEO) study in Germany (Grotlüschen, Buddeberg, and Songa 2023). Both provide clear evidence that such literacy policies do not fully achieve their aims. However, we wonder if the spatio-temporal metaphor of being left behind is even helpful in grasping the global processes hidden in the apparently ubiquitous efforts to literacise the globe. Could it be that processes of literacising the world themselves produce the so-called illiteracy that they are intended to overcome?

In this introduction, we want to take up this question by challenging the image of a tempo-spatial arrangement of literacy that is related to the present and future, and illiteracy that is related to a past to be overcome. Against modes of thinking that our disciplines of psychology and anthropology have partly rejected but that remain deeply entrenched, and going a step further than the "New Literacy Studies" (which are of course no longer so new: see also the article by Uta Papen in this issue), we also conceptualise illiteracy as a by-product of global efforts to literacise the world population and we thus aim to open a space for re-thinking (il)literacies. Being unable to read or write, or having lacked access to school, or—as is now most common—having only minimal competency in reading and writing, seem to us to be above all a relational outcome of biographical, structural, political, and economic influences shared by many people in different countries throughout the world, and research seems to demonstrate that there is no kind of literacy policies that will end it. We do not, of course, mean to imply that literacy policies are all useless and it would be better to do nothing or that they do not differ in subtleness, ethics, pedagogical ambitiousness and usefulness. Rather, we call for a sound realism that rejects an undifferentiated, illusionary and homogenising idea of *one* education for all and one monolithic literacy as a universal goal. Moreover, this realism should include an acknowledgement that literacy politics such as global educational campaigns do not just increase the number of literacised people but simultaneously set a standard of literacy that contributes to marking those who do not meet the new standards as deviant and illiterate. In fact, it is these modifications of world standards of literacy that co-create illiteracy as the problem to overcome. It is in exactly this way that

we understand illiteracy as the relational other to literacy, with both situated in a changing present and not organised in a temporal order of before and after.

At the same time, the life conditions of people with sub-standard reading and writing skills and the ways in which they cope with a world full of written signs and literacy challenges are not at all homogeneous but very diverse, as this issue is aimed at demonstrating. Most importantly, we understand literacy and illiteracy not as static states but as highly dynamic and relational outcomes of individual trajectories and the multiple influences of their living conditions and lifetimes and the social spaces where they live and which they create.

This allows us to suggest a perspective on processes of making and unmaking illiteracy and literacy and learning and unlearning to cope with situations of (il)literacy. We conceptualise these as processes of literacising and illiteracising, which has the advantage of leading away from stereotypical ascriptions of deficiency or obsolescence[1] and spaces of poverty to be improved towards a perception of dynamic and fluid biographies and daily life in which both processes take place in more or less complex and more or less intermingled ways. Such literacising and illiteracising happens in a continuum of self-(il)literacising and hetero-(il)literacising. Moreover, processes of (il)literacising can also happen on a discursive level (see the article by Abou Moumouni and Krauß in this issue).

Within processes of literacising and illiteracising, multiple literacy practices take place that result in multiple forms of action—not only goal-oriented but also norm-, value- and rule oriented—as well as all sorts of creative actions and actions as narratives and/or in narratives and history (see Straub 2006 for this action-theoretical typology, which can also be applied to the field of this thematic issue). Such literacy practices can of course include learning, and learning itself can also be (partly) understood as action. This is the case, for example, with the “defensive” and “expansive” forms of learning outlined by the psychologist Klaus Holzkamp (1993). “Defensive” refers to a form of learning that secures the ever-precarious status quo of an individual within a society; “expansive” to a much more comprehensive and in-depth mode of learning ultimately aimed at changing oppressive societal conditions. These concepts prove useful when analysing processes of (il)literacising. Such an action-theoretical vocabulary is not meant to suggest the presence of “omnipotent” actors. On the contrary, current action theories take the effects of all sorts of limiting factors and the significance of all kinds of contingency into account.

The contributions in this thematic issue help us to re-think the field of (il)literacy research with a view to what is happening in different regions in the world, with different perspectives and methodologies, but also concerning fundamental epistemological reflections. It goes without saying that we do not think that this thematic issue can easily complete this work: on the contrary, it is meant to open a discussion that is urgently needed, not only within academia, but also in the arena of public policy. We now take up some core topics raised in the papers.

[1] Maybe the most prominent example of ordering illiteracy and literacy in an implicit temporal order is Jack Goody’s (1969) edited volume on “literacy in traditional societies”, see also his and Ian Watt’s article in this issue (Goody and Watt 1969).

2 Conceptual shifts

As mentioned above, literacy and illiteracy are often modelled as a binary: opposed and thus fixed. However, there is no single literacy or illiteracy. As Andrew Canessa's article "Learning ignorance and illiteracy through education: reflections on highland Bolivia" convincingly argues, literacy and illiteracy are not neutral terms but are used in specific and changing ways. In everyday interactions in many parts of the world, illiteracy is associated with broad deficiencies: ignorance, laziness, lacking knowledge, being unenlightened. It can also just mean someone is unable to understand the national language, which is often the imported language of a former colonial regime (Spanish in Latin American countries; French and English or other settler languages in Africa). This is the case in Bolivia, as Canessa argues, but he also demonstrates that learning to read and write can mean losing other skills that are important for making a living if children's enrolment interferes with their transmission. In a highland Andean village Canessa has researched for decades, formal schooling has actually had disastrous effects on residents' ability to "read" the landscape, understand the seasons, herd animals, and speak Aymara. Moreover, it also often fails to teach the students to read, write and speak Spanish well enough to compete successfully in urban environments. Thus, formal schooling in the Andes may foster illiteracy and ignorance more than literacy and knowledge.

Being or becoming a digital or technical illiterate (see Robert Serpell's article in this issue; for more on this, see below) can be charges levelled against others or meaningful and sometimes painful self-descriptions as our lifeworld becomes digitalised and depends on everybody understanding technology. Serpell's and Canessa's examples demonstrate that social change and the introduction of new technologies, bureaucracies and modes of governance not only create specific and changing ways to relate literacy in general but also new deficiencies, which are then labelled as illiteracy or ignorance. They also make us aware of conceptual shifts, not only regarding the meanings of the terms but also concerning the reflection of these processes. Here, Jens Brockmeier's article, "Literacy and narrative: discovery stories", is an important intervention alerting us to two related epistemological turns in the production of academic knowledge on literacy in the Global North at least. First, he describes discussions of literacy during the second half of the twentieth century in philosophy (e.g. Derrida 1967), anthropology (e.g. Goody 1969, 1986), psychology (e.g. Luria 1976; Scribner and Cole 1981) and many other disciplines. This "literacy episteme", interestingly, emerged at the same time as the "narrative turn" and brought about a new awareness of oral ways of speaking, thinking and reflecting.

The initiators of these turns were barely aware of each other, but in Brockmeier's understanding they are deeply related. Moreover, they came at a time when modernisation and developmental ideas, as well as educational reforms in the Global North and South led to a first wave of democratising education, mainly in the Global North (in Germany called the "sozialdemokratische Bildungsreform", or "social democratic educational reform"), and also at a moment when mass literacy programmes started to be organised in many countries of the Global South. One could thus assume that at the very same moment when illiteracy in the Global South came to be seen as backwards and needing to be overcome by future-oriented development programmes

a new awareness of the epistemological grounding of western thought in writing culture led to shifts in various disciplines in the social and cultural sciences and in educational policies.

3 Technologies

Robert Serpell uses such concepts from (New) Literacy Studies and ecological psychology as "affordance" to understand the role that modern information and communication technology (ICT) play in literacy practices in the Republic of Zambia in his article "Access to the affordances of literacy: reflections on the evolving influence of ICT in Zambia". Contrasting the immediacy of ICT with more "traditional" media such as television and radio, he analyses the access and uses of literate communication and the impact of ICT on communication practices in Zambian society, with a particular interest in whether modern ICT results in democratisation or, on the contrary, is used for hegemonic top-down control.

In either case, it is impossible to underestimate the impact that new (and not so new) technologies have had on multiple forms of literacy. Smartphones, now widespread throughout the world, have become indispensable coping tools for some who are challenged by tasks requiring literacy. Of course, digital and electronic technologies are not the only important technologies. Since the emergence of writing in ancient times, literacy has always been based on changing technologies in materials (papyrus and paper; pens, ink and pencils) and techniques for writing signs. These may be monopolies or rare, limiting access to literacy, or they may be adapted to reach poorer parts of the population, as in the worldwide introduction of blackboards that accompanied mass schooling. As they are reusable and thus cheaper than paper, in poorer countries slates are used not only in classrooms but for homework as well. However, the use of blackboards is also common in Qur'anic schools, for instance.

Reflections on the technologies that enable, shape, modify or limit literacy should not, however, be limited to material technologies such as paper and pencils, computers and mobile phones. The examples in our issue vividly demonstrate that social technologies, such as translating or mediating, are also critical to understanding how illiteracised people can meet the requirements of everyday life in a literacised world. When parents who cannot read or write fluently in the official state language ask their children to accompany them to offices or medical centres to help them to fill out forms or understand instructions, this use of mediators or translators might be understood as a social technology analogous to using a translation programme on a mobile phone. And, especially because new technologies such as mobile phones or other digital translation programmes are sometimes used in combination with a mediator, in matters of literacy it may not make sense to distinguish between social and material technologies at all. "Alternative" writing systems may also provide a good example of how technology use shapes multiplicities of (il)literacies.

4 "Alternative" writing systems

In political discourses and practices oriented towards the Millenium Goal of "Education for All" and also in much of academia, the notion of literacy is undoubtedly strongly linked to scripts. However, this perspective might be far too reductionist. Consider, for example, weaving in the Bolivian Andes. Denise Arnold's contribution "Weaving as writing: A serious omission in the Bolivian educational reform of 1994" argues that alphabetic writing is just one form of literacy, one that has a far shorter history in Bolivia than weaving. She emphatically presents the latter as another form (or maybe technology) of writing with a much longer history in the Andean region. "Semasiographic" or "natural" writing, such as weaving, is more directed towards things in the natural world, in contrast with "conventional" alphabetic writing that is directed at representing the sounds of human speech. Obviously, weaving does not figure prominently as an "alternative" form of writing in calls for "Education for All", even though it is a set of practices that fulfils complex psychosocial functions ranging from communication to "identity work." But one can of course also think of other such alternatives to standard hegemonic scripts. Consider the many pictorial and sculptural signs in different religious and spiritual contexts that also offer, if you will, texts to be read. One striking difference from alphabetic writing is that such signs, like completed textiles, cannot be changed as fast as words and so their "messages" are meant to last longer. On the other hand, this does not imply that readings of either "semasiographic" writing or pictorial and sculptural signs would stay exactly the same over the years and not be subject to changes.

The ability to read and write Arabic, which in West African countries is mostly learned at informal Qur'anic schools through practices of embodied knowledge (Ware 2014), raises another aspect of "alternative" writings: their subjective value depends on the times and places in which they are practised, and they might be alternative in one place and mainstream in another. For instance, in Benin, literacy is widely understood as the ability to speak, read and write French, the national language, whereas skills in Arabic are widely understood as alternative writing. This is of course completely different from the case in Arab countries, where Arabic is the national script. Similarly, in its day, Andean weaving was considered the central and almost the unique way of writing.

5 Extending the (New) Literacy Studies

The "New Literacy Studies" that began to develop in the 1980s were a very important step towards doing research on literacy as a social practice (see, for example, Street 1984). (As they are no longer so new, researchers now prefer to write "(New) Literacy Studies" or just "Literacy Studies"). The value of Uta Papen's article, "The (New) Literacy Studies: The evolving concept of literacy as social practice and its relevance for work with deaf students", is partly in introducing new theoretical concepts—including multiliteracies, multimodality, real literacies, materiality and affect—developed within the (New) Literacy Studies and applying them to a new field, teaching English to deaf children and young adults.

We believe that extending the (New) Literacy Studies both conceptually and to new empirical fields is highly important. The expansion of this approach again proves its productivity. Based on our own work, we also urge further extensions. (New) Literacy Studies have always emphasised how literacy is a multifaceted everyday activity realised in various “literacy events” and “literacy practices”. While analysing challenges resulting from “situations of illiteracy”, we would argue that although the (New) Literacy Studies have largely moved beyond the binary argument, they retain noticeable traces of the temporal argument. We therefore advocate giving equal attention to new “illiteracy events” or “illiteracy practices” that might be emerging rather than disappearing.

6 The role of bureaucracies and the significance of literacy mediators

Bureaucratic procedures rely heavily on literacy. But what happens if people find themselves in “situations of illiteracy” when faced with bureaucratic demands? And what happens if the form of literacy needed to cope with bureaucratic procedures changes dramatically? These two questions are central to the article “‘Paperwork is so important!’: Processes of literacising in bureaucratic contexts in Benin and Bolivia” by Issifou Abou Moumouni and Rebekka Krauß. Although bureaucracy and literacy is a classic theme in the social sciences, the authors argue that bureaucracy and illiteracy is not. In their empirical analyses of data from Parakou in Northern Benin and El Alto and La Paz in Bolivia, they apply the concept of (il)literacising that we discussed above and show complex and interrelated forms of literacising and illiteracising in bureaucratic contexts. For example, after the digitalisation of bureaucratic procedures in Benin, formerly literate persons suddenly become illiterate. In coping with old or sudden “situations of illiteracy” help from “literate” persons can be of great value, as Abou Moumouni and Krauß demonstrate repeatedly. These could be called “literacy mediators”, a well-known figure in literacy studies (see, for example, Papen 2010), and could certainly be categorised in various ways. One possibility we will propose here is a rather basic typology that can later be further elaborated upon. It arranges literacy mediators along two dimensions: whether they are paid by an institution and whether they are professionals. This results in a four-field matrix (a beloved model, at least in psychology; Table 1).

Acting and interacting within these different fields can imply quite different possibilities, dangers, challenges and problems as well as different forms of further literacising and illiteracising. Looking at the field “non-professional and not paid”,

Table 1 Literacy mediators—a basic typology

	Professional	Not professional
Paid by an institution	A courtroom interpreter who translates from a local language into the official one	A nurse who helps to read a medical prescription
Not paid by an institution	A person who drafts a written contract paid for by an illiterate person	A daughter who helps to read a letter or explains medical terminology at a health centre

consider what might happen if a literacy mediation depends on a romantic relationship that ends. Or look at the field "professional and not paid" and think about the results of a betrayal of trust. But in all such relationships, vulnerability on the part of those who are considered or consider themselves "illiterate" is, of course, a major theme.

Regarding technologies that are mainly conceptualised as material and non-human, we argued above that the discussion must also extend to social technologies to fully grasp the multiplicity of technologies that enable literacies. The reverse may be the case for the mediators when we reflect about possible "non-human literacy mediators" such as smartphones, which also play a major role in processes of literacising and illiteracising. However, we think that it is better to label these as tools and technologies and reserve the term literacy mediator for human actors, even if these humans may also use smartphones and similar tools. However, science and technology studies and network theory may argue otherwise.

7 Concluding remarks

With a wide geographic range extending from Latin America through Africa to Asia and the Global North, the articles in this issue demonstrate how multiple forms of (il)literacy are widespread around the globe. This multiplicity is not restricted to languages, scripts or modes of learning. Another part of the processes of literacising, illiteracising and everyday struggles to cope with literacy standards is to negotiate what is considered literacy. Yet another is what we have called "alternative writings" (even though labelling them as alternative contributes to defining a "core" literacy). In some countries, as we have seen, for instance, in Benin, the notion of literacy is inextricably linked to knowledge of the national language of French. In other parts of the world, it might be much more closely related to the ability to fill out a form, whether in English or in a "local" language.

Besides the question of what is considered "literate" or "illiterate" in each context by its respective actors, the concept of literacy has constantly been extended and refined in the academic literature. If it is defined as "the ability to read, write and speak a language in the service of understanding and solving problems with sufficient proficiency to function at work and in society, to achieve goals and develop knowledge and individual potential" (United States Congress, National Literacy Act, cited in Ishikawa and Kiuchi 2010), then the question of which goals are to be achieved and which knowledge is to be developed is crucial to defining different kinds or modes of literacy. Consequently, there have been several attempts to enlarge and refine the concept of literacy.

In this issue, for instance, Krauß and Moumouni have discussed the concept of digital literacy. Similarly, other literacies, such as health literacy (Hayes et al. 2007; Bello 2014), or bureaucratic literacy (Moodie 2013), have been proposed. On the one hand, these enlargements and refinements demonstrate that reading and writing is always linked to specific fields of knowledge and knowledge production. On the other, the concept of (il)literacy has tended to become less specific and include other skills such as understanding a bureaucratic procedure, using computer skills,

or knowing medical terminology. Thus, as the definition of literacy is expanded, it tends to become synonymous with "knowledge" in a similarly broad sense. We would therefore prefer a more limited understanding of literacy that remains bound to writing and reading, but that does acknowledge both their multiple forms and also the various individual and societal processes that shape literacy and modify it again and again. And as we have argued throughout this introduction, we see it as intrinsically connected with illiteracies, which are multiple as well.

As long as literacy remains a global theme of politics, schooling, labour markets and bureaucratic procedures, illiteracy appears as well. Recognising that it is impossible to completely eradicate illiteracies would be an important step in many debates. Discussing not only how to deal with processes of literacising but also how to make processes of illiteracising more productive in each social space would be a major step in the production of academic knowledge and beyond.

Acknowledgements We would like to extend our wholehearted thanks to the participants of the workshop "Multiplicities of (Il)literacy", which took place at the University of Bayreuth on 9–10 May 2022 as part of the joint project *Learning beyond the classroom: Coping with illiteracy in urban literate environments in Benin, Bolivia (and Germany)*. The present thematic issue is a product of our reflections at this workshop, which broadened our horizons concerning (il)literacy and helped to focus our conceptual thoughts. Furthermore, we would like to thank the members of the research section Learning within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth for valuable discussions. Last but not least, we once more thank Daniel Flaumenhaft for his meticulous language-editing of all the other texts in this issue.

Funding This article is the outcome of research conducted within the Africa Multiple Cluster of Excellence at the University of Bayreuth, funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy—EXC 2052/1—390713894.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Conflicts of interest E. Alber and C. Kölbl declare that they have no competing interests.

Ethical standards For this article no studies with human participants or animals were performed by any of the authors. All studies mentioned were carried out in accordance with the ethical standards indicated in each case.

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