

WHAT IS LITERACY?

In the past, literacy simply referred to a person's ability to read and write, but over the years has been expanded to include their ability to *read, write, speak, listen*, and also *understand*.

With the introduction of technology literacy became even more complex. Literacy skills now include a person's ability to *access, navigate, create, comprehend*, and *communicate* using a vast array of devices, in a multitude of ways. Such skills are known as *digital literacy* where someone combines *text, images, audio, video*, and *animation* to present information.

The Early Years Learning Framework (a document by the Australian Government regarding the education of young children aged 0-5 years), includes in its definition of literacy – *music, movement, dance, storytelling, visual arts, media* and *drama*. In other words, literacy refers to *all* the ways and all the *combinations* of ways, we as human beings communicate with one another.

To become literate in the 21st Century, means that children of today must learn an incredibly complicated set of skills, far beyond mere reading and writing. However, young brains are equally incredible and complicated and if given the opportunities, can *easily* learn such complex skills.

There is one more aspect to literacy, which is incredibly important, in fact vital, especially in this digital age. It's something that is instilled into university students (or should be!) and is called *Critical Literacy*. Which basically requires students to critique what they are listening to, reading, or viewing. It involves *critical thinking* which is the ability to analyse, interpret, evaluate, reflect upon, and respond. It's a vital skill in this digital age, to be able to work out if what we are reading and viewing, is *true and correct* and coming from a *valid and reliable* source. In addition we need to be able to find *other research*, which supports what is being said, that in turn is valid and reliable to provide further evidence and proof. In a world where there are literally billions of websites to choose from and all telling us the 'truth' we need to be able to discern what is *fact*; from what is simply someone else's *opinion*; or what is being pushed, marketed, or advertised in order to make money; or serve a particular group or an individual's political, social, economic, or spiritual agenda.

Critical thinking and critical literacy does not just begin in university, or even high school. The basics of critical literacy and critical thinking can start with very young children. But first let's start with the basics of literacy – reading, writing, speaking, and listening:

Reading

Learning to read English involves firstly learning the 26 letters of the alphabet, not just their names, but what they look like, and more importantly, what they *sound* like. In English, this is not such a simple task, because many letters have more than one sound! There are *26 letters* in the alphabet, but there are *44 sounds* (see my handout *English is totally nuts!* for a far more detailed explanation). Vowels for instance have short and long sounds, like the A in *Amy* or the A in *Amber!* The letters C and G both have hard and soft sounds, like the C in *city* or the C in *car* and the G in *giant* or the G in *green*. Thus children learn how the letter C can also sound like an S, but just to make it extra tricky, in the case of the word *cello*, it sounds like 'ch'. English really is nuts!

To become proficient readers children need an understanding of **phonics** and basic **alphabetic principles**. They need to be able to recognise patterns and **decode** information, and constantly build upon their own **vocabulary**.

- **Phonics** is the sounds the letters (and combination of letters) make
- **Alphabetic principles** include such rules as S and H together make the sound 'sh'
- **Decoding** involves breaking a word into 'pieces' or syllables to sound it out and comprehend its meaning e.g. cat – c-a-t, caterpillar – cat-er-pil-lar.
- **Vocabulary** is the words that a person can read, pronounce, and also understand.

Together with learning the sounds the letters make, we must then learn how those sounds and letters, when combined, form words and sentences. In addition, we also have to understand and make meaning from what we read. Reading not only involves letter and word *recognition* but also *comprehension* and *retention*. In addition successful readers must also acquire *fluency*. Without fluency, reading remains laboured and awkward and far from pleasurable, efficient, or useful.

Comprehension and retention means children must not only be able to read words and sentences, but also *understand* (comprehend) what is being said. Asking children questions along the way to ensure they're understanding what's being said helps develop comprehension skills. Relating what's being said to their everyday lives and things they already know also helps their comprehension skills. *Retention* is another important part of becoming an efficient reader. It's no good being able to read without remembering what's being said! This is where lots of memory games and repetition of words and their meanings come into play.

Asking children to *predict* what comes next is also helpful in developing those *critical thinking* skills I talked about above. Not just guessing or predicting what word might come next, or what that picture is telling us (both extremely important), but also asking – Why does she *feel* like that? Why did she get angry? Why did he *do* that? What made him *react* like that? In other words, looking in more detail at emotions and conflicts, the motivations behind the actions of certain characters, their moral dilemmas, as well as their values and principles.

Reading about others and their emotions, conflicts, and motivations etc. helps children make important *connections* with characters to allow them to understand others, both those who are similar to them, and those who are completely different. This helps them understand different points of view, different opinions, different ways of thinking about the wider world and not just their own little lives. Which in turn develops *tolerance*, *respect*, and *acceptance* of others. It also allows children to realise we are all very complicated individuals, we all have complex emotions to deal with, difficult decisions to make sometimes, and the fact we can be both nice and nasty, caring and cruel, happy and sad, calm and frustrated, all in the same day (or hour!). Books help children overcome all these dilemmas, by realising other people go through the exact same things!

Writing

As with reading, *letter recognition* is the first step, followed by one's knowledge of the letter sounds, to blend and combine those letters into words. Words are then combined to make sentences, which in turn, need to make sense! Children need a good knowledge of *language*, a good *memory* and good *concentration* skills in order to write efficiently. But before all this can occur, children need to develop the muscles in their fingers (their *fine motor skills*). I know this sounds all too simple but children need strong little fingers to be able to hold a pencil and write.

You will notice with very young children (between the ages of 1 and 2), that their first attempts at using a pencil (or chalk, or crayons etc.), involves making large sweeping marks across the page, using their whole arms, and gripping their pencil with a fist like grip. This is because the large (gross) muscles of the arms develop long before the fine muscles of the fingers (this is referred to as *gross muscle skills*). As they get older (between the ages of 2 and 3), they begin to have more control of their fingers and start to develop more of a 'pencil grip'. Things such as squishing and moulding playdough, threading beads onto string, mixing and matching small objects, scissors and cutting activities, are not just meaningless 'play' activities for children. They help develop strong muscles and good hand-eye coordination, which is exactly what's needed in order to write.

The activities provided in childcare and kindergarten are not just mindless play to keep children busy while their parents are at work, which is what many people think. They are all carefully chosen to help develop fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, memory, concentration, etc., which are the vital skills needed to learn to write. Action songs, singing and dancing also help develop such skills, in addition to learning the language of course. Giving children large chunky crayons and chalk to draw with at this age, also helps develop their grip. As their fine motor skills improve their drawings become more controlled. They no longer use their whole arms to draw, their grip changes, lines become shorter, they can stop and start more, then eventually (at about the age of 3), they start to be able to do circles, dots, diagonal lines, and wiggles – the very beginnings of writing!

Speaking

Learning to speak is not really something that is *taught* as such, it just naturally occurs through mimicry and the desire to communicate (all being well with ears and eyes of course!). The desire to communicate is just a natural part of being human and happens without really trying. It begins with babies learning to distinguish from the barrage of sounds they hear, the specific sounds other humans utter – in other words *speech* – as opposed to the sounds of music, traffic, and everything else. They soon realise that these human *sounds* which bring comfort, joy, care, safety, and fun (or fear!), actually *mean* something. They also learn, surprisingly quickly, that by copying them, other humans respond, and without knowing it, babies naturally begin to communicate and converse!

Babies firstly learn their Mother Tongue (obviously named because it's generally passed on by the Mother), but can pick up and learn all the languages spoken around them and easily become fluent in multiple Tongues. Despite such extraordinary abilities of the developing brain, an alarming number of young children these days are instead in need of speech therapy, to learn to utter even the basic sounds of their First Language. This is not to say they can't *understand* and *comprehend* what is being said to them, but many are incapable of correctly speaking themselves. For this I blame screens! Television screens, computer screens and phone screens, all of which can be wonderful learning tools, but none of which involve conversation or speech. They are all about viewing and listening, which are important skills of course, but children are missing vital opportunities of not just *talking* but actually being involved in *conversation*.

I cannot emphasise enough the importance of *conversation* with young children – learning to speak, listen, wait, take turns, respond, question, answer, share their opinions – none of these skills are provided by looking at screens. Don't get me wrong watching television and using computers have all sorts of other learning opportunities, but they don't involve speech and

conversation. Gone are the days when television was the only screen we saw, now children, even babies are exposed to televisions, computers, mobile phones, iPads, and many more besides!

While all these different technologies can be great learning tools and provide a wealth of educational opportunities, what it means is that children are missing out on *conversation*. They see and hear others talk on screen, so their comprehension skills are high, but they themselves are not speaking back, and therefore their mouth and tongue muscles are not actually forming properly. In order to speak we need our jaw muscles, tongue, lips, and vocal chords and like any other muscle, they need movement, exercise, and repetition, or else they simply can't do the work they were designed to. So by all means allow screen time, but make sure conversations – taking turns to speak, listen, and respond – are also high on the agenda!

The only way a human can learn to speak is to have all the muscles of the tongue and mouth working properly, and like I say all muscles in order to develop properly, need movement, exercise, and repetition. Common mispronunciation in young children's speech include saying 'th' for 's' sounds, and 'w' sound for 'r' sounds. These are merely developmental issues, they are not *problems* as such, most children grow out of such things as they develop all the right muscles. However, if young children are making unusual sounds that are not part of the regular speech they are hearing around them, then more often than not this could indicate a hearing problem. Always encourage hearing checks with young children, because if caught early many hearing issues can be easily overcome, ensuring speech is not delayed in any way.

Another important aspect of conversation is that young children who are constantly spoken *at* and not *with* can easily understand commands and directions – 'Sit down', 'That's enough', 'Be quiet', 'Get to bed' – but do not develop all the muscles needed for speech. Their muscles simply do not get enough exercise to develop properly. This has led to an extraordinarily high demand for speech pathologists in kindergartens and the early years of school. In case you haven't realised yet, I simply cannot stress how important *conversation* is for young children!

Listening

Listening and hearing are two completely different things. As long as a person has nothing wrong with their ears and no hearing impairment, then hearing is something every one of us is doing constantly, it's just what ears do! It's the same with the eyes, unless there's something wrong with them or you're visually impaired, then eyes are constantly seeing (unless of course they're closed), it's just what eyes do. Unlike eyes though, ears can't physically be closed, so they're hearing constantly, day and night.

Listening on the other hand is something we consciously do. Hearing is unconscious it happens without us thinking about it, but listening requires our attention, involvement, engagement, and concentration. Most people when listening to others, are only doing so half-heartedly, and are far too busy planning what they're going to say next, and impatiently waiting for the other person to finish so they can start talking again! *Active* listening however, takes the focus off ourselves (and all our brilliance!), and puts our attention on someone else and trying to *understand* their point of view. It requires *motivation* and *patience* and demonstrates *acceptance* and *respect*. We can listen without being interested, but if one is *actively* listening then we're not just '*tuning out*' but being *considerate* and *attentive*. This is especially important with young children.

Actively listening to a young child shows you really care, tells them they (and their thoughts, feelings, and opinions) are important and that they matter, it also provides them with the vital conversation skills they need to become confident, socially adept adults. Conversing with children helps them understand how and why we use language, which words to use and when, how to wait and take turns. It develops their own active listening skills, and teaches them tolerance, respect, and acceptance of others. It also strengthens all those little muscles in the tongue and mouth which as I've already said are *vital* for speech development.

Another important part of active listening is the simple fact we are giving our *time* and *attention* to someone else. Human beings are naturally narcissistic, we're just walking egos basically, constantly wanting to be fed – 'Feed me, feed me, look at me, look at me!' – is the ego's constant catchcry! We want attention, love, praise, pleasure, we like to think we're right, that we know things (about pretty much everything!), and that we know best. The trouble is we are *all* thinking like that *all* the time! Don't get me wrong, because it's a natural part of every one of us, then there's nothing wrong with it as such, it's just we need to learn how to control ourselves, learn how to curb our desires, wants and needs, learn how to get on with others, learn how to accept other people's opinions, and not create conflict wherever we go!

Actively listening when in conversation with others helps us curb our narcissistic tendencies. Every one of us knows what it's like to be 'caught' in a conversation with a narcissist, someone who thinks they know everything about everything, they like to tell us how to think, how to live our lives, and won't let us 'get a word in edgeways'. Such people are loud, annoying, utterly exhausting, and basically a pain in the butt! *Actively* listening to others helps children (and adults!) realise that other people know things too, that their points of view matter, that their opinions matter, that they too have interesting things to say, and that we can learn a great deal from them.

Not only does active listening help all of us develop tolerance, respect, acceptance and understanding, but also *open*-mindedness and *broad*-mindedness. Having an *open* mind enables far more learning to take place – we don't close ourselves off thinking we already know things, we are genuinely interested in finding out something new. *Broad*-mindedness allows us to think far outside our own limited little world we live in and all our knowledge and understandings and instead experience a 'whole new world' through the eyes of lives of others.

Listening can of course not involve speech at all, but one can simply be listening to sounds e.g. the ocean, music, birds singing, traffic, anything at all. Again, they can just be 'background noise' that we are simply *hearing*, or we can actively 'tune in' and *listen*.

Access, navigate, create, and communicate

Digital natives is a term coined by Marc Prensky in 2001 and describes the children of today who were born into this technological age of home computers and the wonders of the Internet. Those of us in our 50s and older though are considered *digital immigrants*, where such devices were non-existent in our childhoods and instead, we've had to learn a whole new set of skills to become proficient users of digital technology. That's not to say we *can't* learn these skills, it's just we find it *much* harder to learn, compared to the techno whiz-kids of today! *Digital natives* have no problem whatsoever of *accessing* the information they need, *navigating* with ease through the myriad of sights and sounds to get there, then can just as easily *create* their own multimedia presentations

etc., *communicating* a wondrous array of knowledge and fun to others through *text, images, audio, video*, as well as *animation*. It's a treat to watch!

Becoming literate in today's world not only involves reading, writing, speaking, listening, and understanding, but it now includes all those extraordinarily complex digital literacy skills needed in the digital world. To begin with we need to know how to *access* information on the Internet and its millions and billions of websites and social media platforms. Owning a device such as a mobile phone or laptop is one thing but working out how to *access* what you need is quite another!

Take the *Amazon* website as an example – here you will find, as with most other websites, a multitude of different fonts and abbreviations; a complex layout of information; there are a vast array of images in the form of photographs, cartoon style pictures, drawings, moving pictures, animated gifs, adverts, icons, symbols (and in the case of mobile phones and emails, emojis); one needs to understand how search bars and keywords work; typing, writing and spelling skills are all needed; reading is not just about left to right and top to bottom like with a book, one needs to navigate up, down, left-right and right-left; one also needs to find and use clickable links, which come in the form of words, sentences, icons, symbols, and images; in addition mathematics and purchasing skills are required.

Another vitally important skill needed to navigate the Internet is *critical thinking* skills and *discernment*, being able to determine which sites contain *genuine knowledge, verifiable facts*, and come from a *reliable source*, and which sites are not just full of some random person's opinion! We need to discern which sites have knowledge that can be *verified* and *cross-checked*, and don't contain text and images that are 'made-up', misconstrued, or photoshopped! This of course is way beyond the scope of a young child, but young children *can* be taught critical thinking skills and it's vital that we do so (see below).

Digital literacy also includes all sorts of additional skills needed to *create* webpages, social media pages, or a YouTube channel etc. For example, one needs to know how to upload and download software, images and texts; how to take photographs, and make videos and animations; how to then manipulate and edit photos and movies using *Photoshop* and other editing software; how to link all your information together; how to set up an online shop, contact and email system; one may also need digital drawing and animation skills; more advanced skills of programming and how to write computer codes may also be needed; and finally knowledge of how to present all the information you wish to convey in an appropriate manner for your audience to access, navigate, read, and respond to.

Thus, digital literacy is *incredibly* complicated, yet even the youngest of children seem to naturally know *what* to do and *how* to do it, and can learn such skills, frighteningly fast!

Singing, dancing, and action songs

I'm not sure if there's a child in the world who doesn't like music, if there is, I certainly haven't met them yet! Even Deaf children love the feel of repetitive beats and vibrations even though they can't hear the words and music. The love of music seems to be an innate part of being human, and what a wonderful thing that is. The youngest of babies have the most delightful responses to music, toddlers all love to demonstrate their dancing skills, and young children absolutely love sing-a-longs and actions songs. There are thousands of songs that young children enjoy, but some of the most popular are: *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed; The Ants Went Marching*; and

The Wheels on the Bus (or the animal version – *The Seals on the Bus!*). Some golden oldies include: *There was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly*; *Over in the Meadow*; and *Old MacDonald had a Farm*; and in Australia, *Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree!* Actions songs include: *Incy, Wincy Spider*; *Five Little Ducks*; and my all-time favourite, *Galumph went the Little Green Frog!*

Even though singing and dancing just seem like simple, fun activities, they are actually surprisingly complex and make the brain ‘light up’ when you do them. Meaning all the brain’s functions are being utilised and developed while singing and dancing, in fact such brain function is even more complex when learning to actually play an instrument. Studies have been conducted where brain waves were ‘read’ while people performed all sorts of creative and mentally challenging tasks e.g. doing mathematics, writing, drawing, singing etc. The only activity that involved the *entire* brain and created the most *complex* neurological connections, was when participants actually *played* an instrument. It didn’t matter what instrument they played, the whole process of learning to play music, made their brains light up like Christmas trees!

Encouraging young children to sing, dance (and play an instrument!), creates confident, capable, well-balanced, intelligent, socially and emotionally well-developed adults. Singing for instance, involves listening, language, articulation, breathing, rhythm, rhyme, tempo, counting, keeping a beat, pattern recognition, comprehension, retention, memory, and expression. Then when you add movement, actions, and dancing, then you also encourage coordination, control, balance, and often mimicry, synchronicity, cooperation, and a great deal of humour! Singing and dancing also improve posture, self-esteem, and self-confidence. On top of all of that, it’s fun!

Critical literacy

As I said in the introduction, there is one more aspect to literacy, that in this digital age, has become *vital* and that’s *Critical Literacy*. Which basically means we need to learn how to critique what we are listening to, reading, or viewing. It involves *critical thinking* which is the ability to analyse, interpret, evaluate, and respond. In this digital age – when literally *anyone* at all can create a website and make it look totally credible and believable, and provide information about literally *anything* and make it sound like the truth. We need to be able to discern what is appropriate, relevant, factual, reliable, and truthful and have the skills necessary to question, analyse, research and confirm for ourselves the ‘facts’ being presented. I cannot emphasise enough how important this is, so as not to be fooled, tricked, and trapped into believing anything and everything people tell us, or what we see on the television, or what we read online.

Critical literacy begins with critical *thinking*, and for young children this begins ever so simply, with providing them with all sorts of experiences and then asking questions! Questions that really get children *thinking* about a situation, *observing* what’s going on, *reflecting* on what’s happened, and *predicting* what might happen next. Teachers and educators are trained in how to ask children such questions, beginning with what are known as Open Questions as opposed to Closed Questions. Closed questions basically require a yes or no answer, but Open Questions provide all sorts of possibilities for complex conversations and getting children to really *think!*

Closed Question: Did you have a good time at childcare today? Answer: Yes (or No!)

Open Question: What did you do at childcare today? Answer: We made...

Closed Question: Did you like the movie? Answer: Yes (or No!)

Open Question: What was your favourite part of the movie? Answer: The part where...

I know that sounds incredibly basic and simple, but you'd be surprised at how many closed questions we ask throughout the day and how beneficial it can be to ask open ones instead. We also need to be asking children other more complex questions. Questions that get children thinking about:

- WHY things happen e.g. why the very hungry caterpillar got so fat
- WHY we say and do the things we do e.g. why we need to go to school
- WHY people react the way they do e.g. why did she get so upset
- HOW things work e.g. how does a bicycle work
- HOW things are made e.g. how do you make a cake
- WHAT things are made of e.g. what is a jumper made of
- WHAT might happen next e.g. what might happen next in the story
- WHERE things come from e.g. where does milk come from
- WHERE to go if we need certain things e.g. where can we go to buy bread
- WHICH things we need to complete a task e.g. which tools we need to make a garden
- WHO we need to talk to about certain things e.g. who do we talk to if we feel unwell

Questions such as these that ask children Why...?, How...?, What...? etc. gets them thinking more deeply about a situation or event. In this way they become *active* learners and not just *passive* receivers of information. Their minds are actively engaged, they are thinking, imagining, creating, examining, questioning, wondering, reflecting, reasoning, and responding. In addition we also need to ask What if...? type questions which can literally be about anything. They can be nonsensical e.g. What if we had wings? What if we could understand what dogs say? Such questions get children to think imaginatively and creatively, expanding their thinking entirely. Or What if...? questions can be far more practical. What if there was an accident at home, what would you do, who would you call?

Good critical thinkers also have good observation skills. They are good at observing all sorts of things: what's going on around them; the motivations, reactions, and behaviours of others; the body language and facial expressions of others; changes in the 'mood of a room' or in the natural environment etc. They are also good at observing their *own* thoughts and emotions, and their own motivations, reactions, and behaviours. Questions that encourage children to look more closely at things, people, places, and themselves, creates good observation skills which leads to more active and critical thinkers.

Critical thinking is a vital skill in all endeavours – mathematics, science, history, economics, morals, ethics, health, music and the arts, the natural world and environmental studies. Without critical thinking no advances would be made in any field. Without imaginative, creative critical thinkers, no inventions would ever have come about.

Literacy – what a complex and wonderful thing it is!