The encroaching culture of illiteracy

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Abstract
Despite all the attention given to skills training and the development of functional literacies it seems as if these developments do not address the deeper human needs of meaning and sense making in the world. It does not lead to a more adequate understanding of the world in its full complexity, neither does it create an awareness and understanding of the intricacies of human relations. The danger is that these literacies will rather lead, as their unavoidable consequence, to illiteracy on a grand scale. What is desperately needed for the sake of our human future is the development and cultivation of a comprehensive literacy that will enable people to perform the necessary skills but enable them at the same time to live full, meaningful human lives. Certain strategies for achieving this ideal are proposed.

INTRODUCTION
It is interesting to note that, at a time when chaos (Gleick 1987) and complexity (Morin 1990) in the sciences and philosophy have been rediscovered, we are experiencing not so much the embracement of these notions and what they represent (as one would expect), but rather the phenomena of simplification and reductionism, with accompanying strategies. It is almost a case of two parallel cultures emerging and gaining momentum as they develop. Has this something to do with the idea of literacy? How important are the term and the idea? They may have decisive importance, which will hopefully become clear as we proceed.

Literacy has to do with reading, writing, understanding, thinking, letters and how to handle letters. But is it only literally letters, or is more involved? There is even the possibility of talking about ‘the crisis of literacy’, referring to the threatening loss of literacy in the traditional sense (Bloom 2002), especially in view of the numerous kinds of literacy that emerged recently and the strong opposition created between the different approaches to literacy. One argument for their emergence is that students do not possess the necessary verbal skills (are no longer significantly literate) to perform well in their studies and need remedial training if they are to be successful at university. If academia is to remain available to these new students, it must provide the requisite corrective training. In the changed economic, political and fiscal environment of the past decade or more, marked by cutbacks in allocations for higher education, only market-related arguments are considered as motivations for programmes,
faculties and departments. New programmes in writing and composition, for example, have been put in place and established very often at the cost of other established institutions. The major question is: Will these kinds of literacy solve the problem of ‘the crisis of literacy’, or will they take us in the opposite direction?

The destiny of institutions like the humanities (for example philosophy, literary criticism and comparative literature, literature studies, as well as social sciences like history) came under scrutiny. Are these institutions immune to the forces at play in society at large? Or should they, given their long histories and tradition, be subject to any scrutiny at all, and instead unquestioningly accepted? An analysis of these institutions is urgently required to establish the legitimacy of their defence of standard humanistic values and their claims to a ‘high literacy’ (Steiner 1978). In South Africa, with high levels of poverty, we may ask whether we can afford such ‘expensive’ (measured in terms of student numbers) offerings. However we may also ask whether it is not because of the animosity against the humanities that we experience such a lack of sensitivity towards the poor and their fate. As a matter of principle we should also ask whether the multiple created literacies for the performance of specified functions are able to deal with issues like chaos and complexity, or even widespread poverty, for example – if not, we need to ask what is needed.

FROM SEMI-LITERACY TO ILLITERACY

The new writing and composition, and even reading, programmes have asserted their autonomy by focusing on what they perceive as societal demand or their clientele’s requirements. Worldwide, professional schools (engineering, business, medicine, agriculture, and library and information science) have played a decisive role in this situation: they want students who can write in their respective fields; therefore writing programmes have set up different tracks for students on the basis of their future vocational orientation: writing for business, for law, for science, for medicine, for technology, and so on. The notion of literacy functioning in these programmes is very much that of a ‘restricted literacy’ (Godzich 1984) or ‘semi-literacy’ (Steiner 1978). These literacies, and they are many (computer literacy, science literacy, library literacy and information literacy, etc), offer competence in a specific code, without any (or at most a very rudimentary) general awareness of the problem of codes and codification in language. This lack of awareness may imply a lack of literacy to cope with this problematic situation or it may even send out signals of illiteracy. According to Godzich (1984, 29) one can put this even more bluntly:

[W]hereas one would have expected that a crisis of literacy would have called for a greater appreciation of the multiplicity of functions that language performs, the foremost of which is the ability to code and to transcode experience and to provide
cultural directions for its interpretation, handling, and elaboration, one finds instead a further instrumentalization of language, where the latter is shattered into a multiplicity of autonomous, unrelated languages, with the competence to be acquired restricted to just one of these. It should be noted that, in this process, any pretense of addressing the needs of the so-called disadvantaged student population [or even the needs of the labour market] has quietly evaporated [my emphasis].

With this instrumentalisation or industrialisation of language and of the means of disseminating language came the explosion of the semi-literacies, as emphasised by Steiner (1978, 42), characterising a technocratic and mass-consumer society. This is a typical example of what can be called an inadequate discourse, whereby words fall short of human experience. It is language as a whole that is being cheapened, brutalised, emptied of exact force, by mass instrumental usage. The advocates of this ‘vocationalism’ are among the strongest backers of this movement towards semi-literacies, which is a clear indication of the powerful societal forces at work here. At issue is what may be called the ‘ideology of literacy’. Any defence against this ideology, based merely on traditional humanist values – as many would wish for – may be totally ineffectual, without even the slightest impact.

In particular, the nature of the concept of literacy at stake here has escaped examination, not to mention anything about resolving the crisis of literacy. The new writing programmes, given their orientation, do not resolve this crisis; instead they promote a new culture of illiteracy in which the student is trained to use language to receive and convey information in only one sphere of human activity – that of a future field of employment. Yet these very same human beings are simultaneously involved and active across many domains, yet neither informed on nor knowledgeable about these domains. In other words they remain ignorant within these domains, as well as regarding literacy in general. This very strongly suggests a culture of illiteracy – despite or rather because of the numerous semi-literacies. Currently the emergent problem of ‘literacy retention’ is a major problem in Europe (Fase et al. 1992). Steiner remarks that most American adults have the literacy level of a 12 year old and that about a third of the adult population in the UK cannot read train and bus timetables.

Many studies and discussions on literacy clearly distinguish between semi-literacies, on the one hand, and the question about the possibility of a general notion of literacy with more comprehensive value and effect, on the other. There is a fair amount of agreement about the limits of the one and about the necessity of the other, although these views are often articulated very differently.

Regarding the limitations of these semi-literacies it has already been mentioned how one-sided and ideology-ridden the functional literacies are. It needs to be added that these literacies are accompanied by strategies antithetical to the ultimate in human development. Currently the many kinds of literacy in existence are generally understood as functional literacy, meaning a literacy with a view to a
specific function, in other words a kind of focused literacy. It has an impact and is promising in a specific context. But what are the implications? It's a kind of one-dimensional, one-track-minded, limited vision and insight. Here a major issue is the power of repetition and its accompanying forces of stagnation and sterilisation. Repetition blocks off the very specific human qualities of imagination and invention. With literacies and skills training comes the power of repetition, which is impressively powerful but which inevitably turns into a sterilising force, since a ceiling is constructed beyond which it becomes impossible to think. The vocabulary is simply inadequate for thought at another level – for literacy about world, about life, about meaning. Eventually the real possibility emerges of losing the little that remains of this literacy as well. We are threatened by an encroaching culture of illiteracy.

Besides these obvious limitations, another disturbing development is the emerging possibility of one or other of these literacies becoming an absolute – as though the only, and supremely important and complete literacy – with the complementary strategy of reducing the full scope of general literacy to this one kind of literacy. Information literacy is a case in point (Bawden 2001). Information literacy has the effect of reducing all forms of literacy to itself; subsequently information literacy is seen as a complete literacy. All rhetoric and talk about knowledge and wisdom outside its demarcated field becomes irrelevant and is forced into the background. Another example: the inadequacies of computer literacy are reflected in its inability to give an account of matters involving ‘judgement’ (Weizenbaum 1984), and matters of aesthetics (Wersig 1990), and matters related to ‘the complexities of reading theories’ (Miller 1987) in terms of computer literacy.

These strategies are not limited to short courses in a variety of forms of functional literacies, and the accompanied emphasis on skills training, even though we have a law in place to promote these literacies. They extend to the academic scene as well. Don’t we now speak of methodological skills, theoretical skills, knowledge skills, information skills, and teaching skills, even thinking skills, on the understanding that we have exhausted everything that can be said on these issues? And all these skills are offered in short courses aiming to make students literate in these fields (and not forgetting their unskilled or deskilled colleagues). The same obstacles (the obligation to repeat, the will to forget and remain ignorant, etc) apply in universities as elsewhere: obstacles to invention, to imaginative thinking, to processes of creativity, and so on.

One of the best summaries of the position comes from Michel Serres (1989, 95–96), the French mathematician, philosopher, and historian of science when he compares it with ‘the circus of knowledge’:

The circus fascinates people and locks them in their relations. Nothing else exists for them but the ties which unite them . . . The group closes on itself. It ignores the world. It only knows what it produces, its own representations. Politics has no need
of the world. Philosophers no longer mention it, they remain inside the circus . . . They lock themselves inside the letter of language . . . inside the cave of the media, inside the grotto of politics, inside the well of representation, in the scoop of the letter . . . Rather die than stop the movement of stakes or the staging of struggles, the mass production of fetishes, and the circulation of merchandise. One would rather annihilate the world than let the closure of the circus dwindle away . . . Let us continue to drug ourselves with relations inside the mortal comfort of the cave.

We have decided to ignore and even destroy the world, rather than exchange the comfort of ‘the circus of rational knowledge’ for ‘the whole of our relations’. Then comes an almost desperate plea by Serres, against the odds of the well-entrenched circus of semi-literacies and functional performances of market-driven economies: ‘Let the new knowledge come’ (Serres 1989, 97).

What strikes one in Stuckey’s work *The violence of literacy*, as a matter of particular relevance, is the kind of violence attributed to general literacy in the traditional sense, articulated by Stuckey (1991, 64) in the following way:

The theory in this study is that literacy is a system of oppression that works against entire societies as well as against certain groups within given populations and against individual people. The third world is oppressed by the system of the literacy of the first world; ghetto blacks are oppressed by the American system of literacy education; and a second grade girl is oppressed by a teacher who fails to understand the craziness of the spelling of vocabulary words. Literacy oppresses, and it is less important whether or not the oppression is systematic and intentional, though often it is both, than that it works against freedom.

But in our fights against oppression we must take care not to become violently oppressive ourselves; here, the reader may be oppressed by the author. It is certainly true that violence and dangers of oppression are present in strategies and policies about literacy. We even have an act of legislation that promotes ‘skills training’ – oppressive or not?

Yet are we not confronted here in the promotion of semi-literacies, with a similar form, or perhaps even a more vicious form of violence: the violence of controlling people, the violence of deliberately keeping them below the ceiling, keeping them in a state of eternal repetition? In all these respects they are kept from inventions, from creativity, from promotion and progress so that they do not become a threat. They are forced into an anonymous status of inferiority. These strategies are never explicitly stated. You find out about them by reading between the lines and keeping your ear to the ground. Expressions like ‘We have to make it accessible for our students; the tutorial matter is too difficult; there’s too much theory; the work is too theoretical; it’s in your own interests, if you want to get a job/qualification. We have your well-being and best interests in mind . . .’ These
expressions ride on quiet, well-orchestrated strategies to keep people in their place and ‘backward’. However well-intentioned, the students’ impoverished backgrounds are promoted and perpetuated.

In our more inventive moments we are still keen to blame apartheid for ‘backwardness’, while in the meantime we are very happy to maintain the status quo. Now the violence and dehumanising is hidden and therefore even more pernicious. More cruelty may be involved than the violence Stuckey warns us against. It is a deliberate strategy of keeping people illiterate, with all the barbaric consequences pertaining. Who is going to measure the qualitative and quantitative difference between the violence of traditional literacy in comparison to the violence committed in the name of the semi-literacies?

How important is it to go beyond the ceiling, to move outside the circus confines constructed by the semi-literacies? I believe it is critically important to any society, people, culture and individual. It may mean the difference between civilisation and barbarism, between progress and collapse. If you can’t move beyond and outside, you’re cut off from inventive initiatives. These initiatives promise new futures, and hope. The alternative is desperation and destruction.

For the reasons spelt out in the texts cited, the sole focus on semi-literacies is not only unwise since they are dehumanising; it is also harmful in the perniciously subtle way indicated above. Ample examples in literature emphasise the fact that inventiveness and imaginative thinking cannot be inspired or stimulated by semi-literacies or restricted literacies. Original and creative thought require entirely different styles and approaches.

How can we make a breakthrough in both directions: beyond the ceiling and outside the boundaries? Negatively speaking, perhaps it should be a case of prevention being better than cure: so don’t erect ceilings or build new boundaries out of these necessities (if indeed they are). Positively speaking, it may mean cultivating comprehensive literacy and initiating a spirit of inventiveness. It would be useful to remove certain subtle and very misleading obstacles to achieving this breakthrough, like ideological considerations, the will to ignorance. This intriguing set of issues cannot be discussed within the constraints of this article: they will be dealt with in a future article.

THE MOVE TOWARDS COMPREHENSIVE LITERACY AND INVENTIVENESS

First of all it may be worthwhile to consider some of the more common remarks about the possibility and necessity of a comprehensive literacy. Kevin McGarry (1994, 6) states: ‘Literacy can be synonymous with ‘literacy for work’, or it can be the key that unlocks the treasury of inherited wisdom and culture.’ In addition to literacy as ideology, which implies just enough literacy (no more than necessary) so as to turn individuals into functional members of the modern state. Paulo Freire (1985, 5) stresses another view: ‘Literacy should be regarded as preparing men [and women] for a social, civic and economic role in their own society.’ While the
functional definition of literacy has been associated with narrowly defined programmes with work-related objectives focused on better labour productivity, an ideology-related definition emphasises a supposedly neutral model of literacy that simply comprises technical skills. Freire and Macedo (1987) have developed another definition subsequent to the earlier one: for them literacy is more about ‘reading the world’ than about ‘reading the word’. ‘The need for literacy’, writes Wagner (1994, 34–80), ‘. . . has never been greater, and the gap between literate and non-literate lifestyles is becoming ever larger, with parallel growth in income disparities.’ Literacy and learning are part of the culture of every society. The meanings and uses of literacy are complex and diverse, leading Baker and Street (1994) to distinguish between ‘an autonomous model’ of literacy and ‘a cultural model’ of literacy, both with specific, universal tendencies. In more theoretical terms Bhola (1997, 277–278) defines literacy as follows:

Literacy is the ability of a person to code and decode, smoothly and effortlessly and with understanding, a living and growing system of symbolic transformations of reality, including words, numbers, notations, schemata, diagrammatic representations and other marks, inscribed on paper or other two dimensional surfaces . . . all of which have become part of the visual language of a people and thus have come to be collectively and democratically shared by both the specialist and the non-specialist.

Therefore literacy as process has two layers: surface and core. At the surface, literacy is the skill of decoding and encoding messages in a written language. At the core, literacy essentially is the process of ‘symbolic transformations of reality’ (Bhola 1997, 278). A last example from Bawden (2001, 251): ‘To deal with the complexities of the current information environment, a complex and broad form of literacy is required. It must subsume all the skill-based literacies, but cannot be restricted to them, nor to any particular technology or set of technologies. Understanding, meaning, and context must be central to it.’

These efforts to reflect on literacy clarify one thing: there is indeed a search for a general definition that does not exclude fullness of understanding and meaning, by including all the possibilities of language, reality and human development.

Then we should contemplate another form of literacy, by acknowledging the existence of a specific set of relations between language and literacy – developed under and conditioned by all kinds of circumstances – and a relation that gives new meaning to writing, reading and letters. Social, historical, political, scientific, economic and educational factors and circumstances play a role. The place and definitions of literacy are determined by these circumstances. Literacy has no final or immutable character; it is dynamic and ever-changing. This is true of both ‘high’ literacy and semi-literacies, as well as any possible points that may exist on the continuum between them.

Here we may be justified in distinguishing between two aspects of language, which may help us clarify the two broad types of literacy as well. Lecercle (1985,
6) calls them the material aspect and the abstract aspect. Lecercle’s aim is to explore the ‘delirious borderline’ between sense and non-sense. He questions our most common conceptions of language, whether expressed by linguists or by philosophers, ‘where the old philosophical question of the emergence of sense out of non-sense receives new formulation, where the material side of language, its origin in the human body and desire, are no longer eclipsed by its abstract aspect in terms of which language is seen as an instrument of communication or expression’.

According to the dominant tradition language is seen as an instrument of communication. Language enables us to live in society; it is a vector of our every relation with our fellow human beings; it enables us to phrase our attempts to express truth and to articulate meaning for ourselves. In other words, despite its shortcomings, language makes sense. It can do all this because of its abstract character. This characterisation of language is itself an abstraction. Lecercle (1985, 6–7) writes:

It deliberately ignores various experiences of language which are the daily lot of every speaker; words often fail us, that is, fail to express what we mean; or, conversely, they express too much, more than we mean: they utter what we refuse to recognize, what we would rather have left unsaid. In other words, language becomes tainted by desire, by the actions and passions of our body, by its instinctual drives. Language loses its capacity to communicate. But it can also, at the same time, increase its power: it ceases to be controlled by the subject but on the contrary rules over him.

In a later publication Lecercle (1990) is even more explicit when he emphasises that language is no longer a mere instrument: it seems to have acquired a life of its own. Language speaks, it follows its own rhythm and its own partial coherence, it proliferates in apparent, and sometimes violent, chaos. He treats every utterance as an instance of compromise between the two extreme positions: ‘I speak language and language speaks.’ There is another side to language. This other side Lecercle calls ‘the remainder’.

His aim is to describe this other side of language and he refuses to separate language from the world of which it is a part. This other side is the side that the grammarian, the philosopher of language, the linguist and – even more so – the advocates of all the semi-literacies do not see and cannot see. What Lecercle articulates here reminds us of the expression used by Gadamer, namely ‘the infinite of the unsaid’ and which he links to ‘the whole of what is there’. It also reminds us of the point made by Paulo Freire: literacy is not only about the ‘word’, but about the ‘world’.

This differentiation seems critically important to our effort to understand literacy in its full sense. An instrumentalist and mechanistic understanding of language opens up the possibilities of scientific studies of the phenomenon of
language, as well as of the development of functional literacies of all kinds. Although these are legitimate exercises and strategies, they are unsatisfactory. There is more to language and to literacy than could possibly be offered along these lines. As a matter of fact the limitations of this abstract approach are so serious and pervasive as to pose a real threat. It can only work to a point: like any instrument and mechanism, is subject to degeneration and it cannot come to terms with profound life issues about human meaning, truth and value. There are no mechanisms and instruments for truthfulness, meaningfulness, understanding and validity. Mechanisms and instruments can certainly help us perform functions in certain contexts, but they cannot teach us how to live our lives, how to deal with human suffering, unhappiness, loss and mortality. They cannot take our thoughts beyond their functions. The implication is inadequate thinking – a form of illiterate thinking, a thinking that does not take the full scope of language, world and life seriously. Here it is appropriate to consider the views of Michel Serres (1995), expressed in his conversations with Bruno Latour, on the place of world construction and world composition as an illustration of what can and should be done, which semi-literacies and mere skills will never achieve. We need answers to the questions we all ask, starting in childhood: about death, about the body, the human senses and life, about poverty, ethics and evil, about our relations with our neighbours, and about sickness, youth, nature and education, and so on. Instrumental skills offer no answers; we need direction from our conception of our world. Semi-literacies cannot construct or compose any worlds to provide a context for these questions and answers. Hence the fatal deficiency of the semi-literate.

There is a view that the comprehensive literacy suggested here confronts transformations that it cannot control; these are dictated by materialistic and functionalistic contemporary cultures which are so aggressive that the chances of successfully resisting their powerful market forces seem slim. Comprehensive literacy may face eventual extinction. However, I strongly wish to advocate an opposing view: quite possibly the semi-literacies, and their advocates, once confronted by the full force of the other side of language – where truth, value, understanding and meaning in the world exist – will discover so many of their inadequacies that their only choice will be renunciation and capitulation, in the face of their emotional and intellectual poverty. Here, they are the ones who may face extinction.

Let us think seriously for a moment about the barbarism of ignorance (Steiner 1999), the inability to think, the slim chances of fully developing our human capacities, the inability to confront the challenges of evil, and the inability of these literacies to meet the challenges, even in a small way; then let’s see whether we aren’t in dire need of an alternative literacy to give us hope. Is human life not all about understanding and meaning? Reading the definitions of literacies, one thing becomes clear: literacy is about functioning properly, coping, dealing with matters at hand, coming to terms with one’s situation, acting in situations; briefly it’s about

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coping not only with letters, with texts or documents but, more so, about coping with oneself and one’s world and signs in the world, especially through language. Literacy is about finding one’s place, about coming to feel at home, which happens through and in language. It is not only about writing and reading in a mechanical sense and familiarity with the alphabet. These are only the starting points.

Literacy is about reading, writing and letters, but certainly not only about reading, writing and letters. As a matter of fact literacy is about language, our ability to cope with language – all its richness and multifacetedness. It is indeed about handling language, but also about being handled by language. The first is about mastering language and to this area belong all the literacies and the related skills; the second is about our experience that language is more than us – it is no instrument because it acquires a life of its own. Therefore literacy is not, and has never been in the final analysis, a mere instrument or skill to be mastered. Literacy is a commitment to language and to what language offers in its fullness: its vitality, its dynamics, its vocabulary, its nuances, its capacity to express the world, the fullness and truth of being, the hidden sources of meaning (Steiner 1978, 43). This commitment requires the input of our full being, our feelings, the full scope of our thinking and our imagination. Whoever lacks this commitment lacks literacy. All literacies and all skills, although deliberately ignorant about this, receive their sense from this link to basic or ‘high’ literacy, or what I would like to call comprehensive literacy. Otherwise they all remain empty, hollow, superficial and rudimentary, and set for disintegration.

Literacy is so much more – it is also about the world in which we live, where we describe and are described in language. Paulo Freire emphasised it is not so much about ‘word’ as about ‘world’. Gadamer (1975, 426) emphasises that ‘what is said together with the infinity of what is not said . . . express[es] a relation to the whole of being’. Literacy is not only about language. It is also about world. Moreover, it is also about thought. Steiner (1978, 43) emphasises the link between language and thought which ‘had been open to the truth of being, to the hidden sources of all meaning’. So it is about mind as well, the mind wanting to make sense of us and this world in which we live. Literacy is not only about reading, writing and letters: it is also about making sense. It seems universities don’t grasp this any longer; they have become training schools, training to fulfil certain required functions, rather than education institutions educating in the sense of leading (ducere) students to become explorers and inventors of meaning. They are forced into this by the economistic, means-driven ideology and attitude of the dictating market where financial figures talk, not people.

Etymologically, literacy must be linked to letters, to the science of letters, literary productions (not just fiction!) which can be linked to learning in the widest and fullest sense possible. The Latin literatura means ‘scholarship’. This word is allied to the past participle form of litteratus meaning ‘learned’, as in ‘scholarly’; derived from this is ‘literate’ (‘literatur-ed’). So literacy is acquired, it happened to the person, just as the full maturing over time happened to the wine. This literacy
then refers to terms like ‘learning’, ‘learned’, ‘scholarship’, immersion in the science of letters. Here it is appropriate to associate this literacy with the description of a contemporary French intellectual, Judith Schlanger, who is described as ‘an explorer of lettered space’ (Pradeau 2002, 67). This is a reference to a person who devoted her life and books to the exploration and description of the intellectual world as a dynamic space that moves and reconfigures itself, consisting of inventions and master works. The intellectual world, the world of literacy, is a space of intellectual invention. However different their objects and methods, mathematicians, historians, philosophers, sociologists, literary theorists and information scientists share the same professional obligation: they are required to invent ideas, or at the very least, to displace old ideas, to present and array them in an original fashion. This is not merely the mixing of intellectual fields; it is the result of a perspective ‘that reveals the existence of a common space, which could be called “lettered space” [characterised by its density and intersubjectivity] in keeping with the old usage of the term, which includes arts and sciences’ (Pradeau 2002, 67). The literate person, the person with achieved literacy, is firmly implanted in this space. Even someone equipped with a ‘functional literacy’ will never be literate in the full sense of this term, unless connected in this space. Failure to establish the connection, or a deliberate effort to ignore it, creates a form of illiteracy. In view of the above description of literacy it becomes fairly obvious who can be described as illiterate.

The encroaching culture of illiteracy is a deliberate development. Within its confines antagonism and animosity rage against the notion of literacy described above, excluding ‘writing’, ‘reading’ and ‘scholarship’ – apart, of course, from their definitions for functional purposes within a specific, narrow, superficial area of activity, where in their essential sense terms such as ‘language’, ‘world’, ‘meaning’, ‘truth’, ‘values’ and ‘understanding’ have no place. People who can read and write are not necessarily literate.

The cultivation of comprehensive literacy is not only our highest educational responsibility but also our ultimate human responsibility. The future of this country, of the peoples of this country, of Africa, and of the world, depends on the extent to which these responsibilities are going to be accepted and responsibly pursued.

THE CHALLENGES POSED BY A COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF LITERACY

Literacy and the development of the full human potential

Important in this context is the intellectual, emotional and ethical development of human beings. In an interview Guattari (2002, 43) is specific about this when he responds to the questions: How are we going to organise dialogue, life and the relationship to the body? How are we going to organise a possibility to develop human potentialities, rather than producing what makes today’s economic market run? Human development should be understood as something separate from and
more fundamental than economic development. This development must be linked to the development of literacy.

Literacy and human thinking: defeating ideologies (even, and especially, our own)

Before the development of thinking can receive proper attention it should be realised that there are ‘a diversity of forms of thought evoked which designate the articulations of the multiple dimensions of the same fact of consciousness, namely the fact of knowledge’ (Levinas 1985, 12). Heidegger distinguishes between representative or calculative thought and meditative or speculative thought. Deleuze (1983) in turn distinguishes between ‘the dogmatic image of thought’ and ‘the new image of thought’. While the dogmatic image of thought forces us into the circus of Michel Serres, the new image of thought emerges out of a sensitivity for values; we have to acknowledge the forces that make us think. In addition Deleuze emphasises that this new image of thought enables us to ‘go to the essence of things’ (Deleuze 1983). Adequate thinking is the only defence against the prejudices of ideologies and the only way to identify ideological distortions. This is our equipment for the exploration of lettered space. Human intelligence is the noetic human capacity to assist us here, but it needs to be developed.

Literacy and the need for inventiveness: euretic possibilities

Humanity’s ultimate challenge is to explore possibilities to defeat poverty, destructiveness and evil, to build communities, to develop meaning and to live fulfilled lives. No ‘ready-made’ state can realise these possible dreams because they all depend on the human ability to invent. However the immensely important ability to invent cannot flourish if it remains in the clutches of the systems that promote semi-literacies and mere skills training. Comprehensive literacy is the favourable milieu for inventiveness to emerge and blossom – this is what universities should educate for. Ulmer (1990, 128), with reference to Feyerabend, writes:

As Paul Feyerabend pointed out in Against Method in a way that applies to all divisions of knowledge, pedagogy in the academy is based strictly on the way science is verified, not the way it is invented. Invention, rather, is left to chance and luck. I see this condition to be at least partly the fault of the humanities, which has been imitating the wrong aspects of science – experiment as verification rather than as invention. The humanities, with its arts materials and methods, should intervene in education on the side of invention.

De Beer (1994, 162–170) discusses an example of how painting and sculpture can facilitate inventive ability.
Knowledge networks: the disqualification of all semi-literacies

Travels through multiple intellectual universes, using electronic links to generate the fundamental characteristics of hypertext, change many of the characteristics of print-derived texts, particularly when physically isolated from the printed work on paper. ‘By inserting the individual text into a network of other texts, this information medium creates a new kind of textual entity – a metatext or hypermedia corpus’ (Landow 1992, 71). Such bodies of electronically linked documents have an essential openness and, unlike a printed document, they never reach completion. In this way hypertext fulfils Barthes’ description in S/Z of the ideal text whose networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signified; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilises extend as far as the eye can reach, they are indeterminable . . . the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.

Knowledge networks of which the prototype is perhaps the Internet, a network of networks, confront academics and also libraries with an obvious choice: we have to ‘net-in’, and assist our students to do the same, without discrimination against any text which may appear on the Net, and which we are obliged not to ignore, or wither away on the vine of marginalisation.

Literacy and the library: the books of the world

Taking exploratory journeys through lettered space – this is an image of the contemporary library. ‘Today’s library has changed drastically and yet remains unchanged in its essential cultural mission – as the public repository of imaginative and collective constructions of reality and as an agency to serve different publics in the intra-generational and inter-generational dissemination, utilization and validation of culturally held knowledge’, writes Bhola, adding that ‘the technologization of the library does not necessarily lead to a lowered expectations of literacy. On the contrary, the modern library requires higher levels of literacy and sophisticated knowledge’ (Bhola 1997, 279). Are we willing to comply, if not for our own sakes then at least for our students? We owe it to them.

Literacy and collective intelligence

In the age of globalisation it is most probably time for us to think about what the peoples of the world have in common and can share in significant ways, rather than concentrating on what keeps us apart. Knowledges are certainly what we can
share and pool. Intelligence is the human capacity responsible for the cultivation and development of knowledges, through which we can share what we possess. With this in mind collective intelligence becomes one of the most fruitful scenarios for the world community. Pierre Lévy (1997) is one of the most important developers of this idea with its immense importance for the future of human institutions and human societies as knowledge societies. The strong point about collective intelligence is the acknowledgment that we, I, do not possess full knowledge, that our and my knowledge is fractal and stochastic. For us, the world community, inhabitants of the global world, accomplishing humanity’s optimal possibilities demands that we share our knowledges responsibly. A condition for such an achievement is the development of a comprehensive literacy that will involve all. The place to start is here where we are.

REFERENCES


