

# SMART CURRENCY



**DEFINING LITERACY IN THE MODERN AGE IS CRUCIAL TO BUILDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING THAT PREPARES STUDENTS FOR THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY**

By Eric Celeste

Policymakers and education professionals have emphasized the importance of literacy in a global economy many times this century — in no instance more directly than when a young U.S. senator from Illinois addressed the American Library Association in June 2005:

“[L]iteracy is the most basic currency of the knowledge economy we’re living in today,” then-senator Barack Obama told the library association. “Only a few generations ago, it was OK to enter the workforce as a high school dropout who could only read at a 3rd-grade level. . . . But that economy is long gone” (Obama, 2005).

The speech was given more than a year before Facebook was available to anyone other than university students and more than two years before the iPhone was announced. To suggest that the literacy demands of the knowledge economy have increased and diversified greatly would be

an understatement. How fast are such demands shifting? A 2016 World Economic Forum report on skills stability notes that “nearly 50% of subject knowledge acquired during the first year of a four-year technical degree [will be] outdated by the time students graduate.”

It’s crucial then that we understand what literacy is, how essential it is to learning, and therefore how important it is in the context of professional learning. If we don’t thoughtfully examine our students’ most essential learning needs now and into the future, we are unlikely to conceive professional learning that ensures educators have the knowledge and skills to meet those needs.

In 2012, a joint report by Princeton University and the Brookings Institute attempted to define literacy for the digital age. It concluded that literacy does not mean “simply the ability to decode words or read a text, as necessary as these elementary skills are. Instead we mean the ability to use reading to gain access to the world of knowledge, to synthesize information from different sources, to evaluate argu-

ments, and to learn totally new subjects” (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012).

The following year, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) updated its own definition of 21st-century literacies, noting that “[a]s society and technology change, so does literacy. Because technology has increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments, the 21st century demands that a literate person possess a wide range of abilities and competencies, many literacies.”

Noting that these literacies are “multiple, dynamic, and malleable,” NCTE said that those entering the 21st-century global society must be able to do six things:

- Develop proficiency and fluency with the tools of technology;
- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others so to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;
- Design and share information for global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of simultaneous information;



- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts; and
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments (National Council of Teachers of English, 2013).

Given this broad, complex definition of literacy and its centrality to all learning in schools, it's no wonder that many professional learning efforts at the district or school levels begin with tackling literacy challenges.

For example, schoolwide literacy learning supported by instructional coaches has often been a first step in addressing achievement gaps, especially those in high-poverty systems or those deemed underperforming under the No Child Left Behind Act, recently replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). As Learning Forward (then known as National Staff Development Council) noted in a 2010 report co-published with the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, "In some cases, whole-school efforts to improve literacy instruction ... through intensive school-based literacy programs and coaching may have had the positive effect of providing greater opportunities for teachers to engage in intensive, sustained, school-based professional development activities that are coherent with district curriculum, assessment, and ac-

countability policies" (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010).

This still fits today with our belief that professional learning is meaningless if it is not embedded in content that students are learning and that teachers need to understand deeply. That such literacy has broadened from a text-based definition to "a symbolic representation of ideas" (as noted in this issue's feature, "Literacy mash-up: Discipline-specific practices empower content-area teachers," p. 28) doesn't change the fundamental alignment necessary between content-specific teachers and student learning goals.

It's equally crucial that literacy efforts in professional learning are also aligned to state accountability standards under ESSA and college- and career-readiness standards. ("Scaling up," as Linda Jacobson calls it in her story on this alignment effort, "Tailored for a perfect fit: Flexible templates promote standards alignment and teacher collaboration," p. 18.) The importance of helping teachers learn and convey literacy in a way that helps students meet and exceed English language arts college- and career-readiness anchor standards in reading, writing, speaking, and listening is crucial. Nearly six years after the release of the Common Core standards and the beginning of its state-by-state implementation, we know it won't reach its promise if teachers are not fully prepared to teach them.

Thus is content alignment key between student achievement outcomes and the professional learning and student learning needed to meet state standards. It is a relationship best explained by the Outcomes standard of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning:

**Outcomes:** *Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum*

*standards* (Learning Forward, 2011).

With student learning outcomes as the focus, professional learning deepens educators' content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, and understanding of how students learn the specific discipline. Nowhere is this more important than in discipline-specific literacy. It's an area rich with both a history and knowledge base that adds needed coherence to the professional learning challenge, but also one changing daily to meet the rapid growth and development of the 21st century's knowledge economy.

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