

Some notes on literacies

[David Baume](#) PhD, SFSEDA SFHEA, CDE Fellow

Background – literacies in higher education

The idea of 'literacy' or 'literacies' is receiving significant attention across higher education. This suggests that the idea is being found useful.

But by whom, and why, and for what purposes, and with what actual or potential effects?

Proposed literacies range across at least media literacy, digital literacy, information literacy, copyright literacy, numerical literacy (numeracy?), assessment literacy, employability (careers literacy), library literacy, cultural literacy, academic literacies, research literacy, visual literacy, disability awareness (disability literacy?), environmental awareness (environmental literacy?), and a range of subject literacies, including psychological literacy. There are no doubt others, and will probably be more.

It may be useful to better identify what these various literacies have in common, to suggest they may be conceptualised, treated, incorporated into policy and strategy, taught, learned and assessed.

What are common to these literacies?

- They generally describe capabilities; things that students and graduates can or should be able to do;
- They may describe more than capabilities. They may describe qualities, predispositions, fundamentals of behaviour, guiding values and principles, even elements of academic or professional identity; things that students and graduates do do, as well as simply can do;
- Other of course than the disciplinary literacies, these literacies can be conceptualised, treated, taught, learned, and assessed to some extent generically, without close reference to particular academic disciplines and professions;
- They can also be conceptualised etc. ... as important elements of the practice of particular disciplines and professions;
- Some of them are directly and explicitly supported by Universities, across disciplines or professions; most obviously information / library literacy, employability/careers literacy and digital literacy;
- Purely impressionistically, I think that they may be receiving more and more explicit attention in newer Universities than in older Universities.
- Also impressionistically, I think the concept of literacies may be more used by what we may, however clumsily, call para-academics – for example the librarians, learning technologists, learning developers.

Locating literacies

A simplistic but nonetheless potentially useful distinction is proposed here, arising from this work on literacies, between subjects or disciplines considered as fields of knowledge and considered as fields of practice.

Knowledge

Much of the discourse of higher education suggests a knowledge-based view of higher education. Lectures lecture – imparting knowledge. Professors profess their knowledge. Courses are said to deliver knowledge. We talk about assessing students to find out what they know. A library, whatever physical form it takes and however we access it, is described and treated as a repository of

knowledge. Perhaps the most widely used model in higher education is still Bloom's (1956, 2000) taxonomy of the cognitive domain, which encourages us to start education with knowledge and then build up through understanding, application, analysis and then, on whatever order, evaluation and synthesis. I [have critiqued](#) this account.

The idea of the value of the importance of knowledge spills far beyond Higher Education. "He's ever so clever" may or may not be a compliment, but "She knows ever such a lot" generally is. Quizzes mainly reward knowledge. And so on.

Practice, or capability, or literacies

An extract from a forthcoming chapter on course design and pedagogy for distance learning the chapter encourages starting course design and planning from defining intended learning outcomes; addresses this:

Knowledge and capability

...

This outcomes-based approach seeks to adjust the relationship between knowledge and capability. It seeks to value, more highly than we may sometimes currently do, the critical and reflective use of knowledge, and to value perhaps a little less highly the accumulation of knowledge.

Why is such a shift needed?

- The half-life of many particular items of (true) (useful) knowledge is reducing.
- Knowledge is becoming much more readily available, although always to be approached and used critically.
- The teacher's role as the gatekeeper to knowledge has been much reduced, if not removed completely.
- Graduates are increasingly valued for what they can do, for who and how they are, over for what they know.

Current courses, in their pedagogy and in their assessment, do not always fully reflect these shifts. And these shifts continue to accelerate.

This shift does not deny the importance of knowledge. But – look back at your undergraduate studies. How much of what you were taught then as essential, basic, fundamental to the discipline, still has that status? Discuss your answers with colleagues.

A personal story may make the point:

I went to see my GP. I described my symptoms. He paused, and then said:

"I am sorry, I'm just back from two weeks of holiday, and my brain seems to have emptied itself completely. Do you mind if I look this up?"

"Hm. Would I rather you guessed, possibly guessed wrong, and failed to cure me, or even made things worse? Or would I prefer you to look it up?"

(We had a good relationship, and he knew I worked in education; this was not intended or heard as rude.)

He took my questions as encouragement to look the symptoms up. He used what he looked up – no doubt alongside his fast-returning memory – to prescribe a course of treatment. It worked.

In this short encounter with my GP, I discovered that I value expertise – the ability to do – of course critically, intelligently, responsively, and in a knowledge-informed way – over knowledge alone. Almost 20 years on I still take this view. And well beyond medicine.

Recovering disciplines as fields of practice, as literacies

Recovering the idea of a discipline here means conceptualising and treating the discipline as a field of practice, even as an identity. Not rejecting the knowledge that is an important element of any discipline. Rather, putting that knowledge in its place, as a tool or object for critical and creative thought and action rather than as the summit of aspiration.

Nothing of value is lost, I suggest, when we move away from considering disciplines as bodies of knowledge, and instead consider them as fields of practice, as identities. And much is gained. How does that work? On this account, students both use and critique their advancing knowledge. Indeed, students learn knowledge, and much more besides, as they do the discipline, defining and tackling questions and problems; as they, critically and analytically, start to adopt and explore their forming disciplinary or professional identity.

Knowledge achieves much of its significance in action. Learning to do and learning to be, as developmental and critical functions, are at once more challenging and more rewarding than just learning stuff.

The relationships between knowledge, capability and identity are complex. I shall not explore them further here. Except to suggest that the idea of a progression from, in terms from Bloom's (ibid) taxonomy of educational outcomes in the cognitive domain knowing, and then advancing, as the years of study pass, through understanding and application to analysis then synthesis and evaluation, bears very little relation to how students actually learn. Bloom suggests, or is often taken to suggest, that students start by collecting and memorising a bunch of facts. Then, on a second pass through, they come to understand these facts. And then they revisit these understood facts and learn how to apply them ...

This is of course nonsense. Most teachers don't wholly teach this way, fortunately. But I have seen this Bloomian idea of progression pervade teaching portfolios and HEAcademy Fellowship claims. The idea clearly at least affects the practice of teachers, and is sometimes made explicit in course handbooks. Perhaps, in relation to Bloom, the frequent disconnect between teachers' espoused and enacted pedagogy theories (Baume 2017) is not such a bad thing!

A student is far more likely to learn when a problem, question, issue, idea or challenge seizes their attention, and when they work; at any and all six Bloom levels as appropriate; to solve the problem, answer the question, or do whatever it takes to satisfy them. For now.

The teacher has clear, important and rewarding roles here, including offering questions or problems, helping students to analyse these, and then steering and informing and challenging and reacting – and in helping students to do these things for themselves, and for and with each other. Not so much in telling students lots of stuff, in answering questions that students have not yet asked, as lectures often do.

Bloom's Taxonomy can provide valuable tool for analysing the level of learning outcomes. But it is [disastrous](#) as a guide to course design.

So; literacies can help us to re-conceptualise disciplines in productive ways. Indeed they can help us to recover disciplines to something like what the discipline or profession means for the member, the practitioner, the advocate, the enthusiast, the lecturer. Perhaps something like a field of academic, disciplinary and / or professional practice?

Literacies, going forward

- Literacies may offer a useful way to address and rebalance this often problematic relationship between knowledge and practice.
- The term 'skills' is often seen as having low status. Skills can be 'just skills' or 'mere skills', subordinate to knowledge. This is strange, because many academics actually value highly skilled performance in their discipline or profession. But 'skill' still seems to be associated with low status. This may be a residue of class distinction, a distinction between the refined guardians of knowledge and Lord Salisbury's "horny-handed sons of toil".

Background – the CDE Literacies Project

This small project involved a group of colleagues from across the University of London each writing a short paper on a literacy of particular interest to them. We got together to discuss these various accounts, and used them to develop some of the ideas suggested above. I am very grateful indeed to my collaborators in this quest:

- Sandra Tury – Head, University of London Online library, on Information Literacy
- Matt Philpott, University of London School of Advanced Study, on Research Literacy
- Elizabeth Wilkinson, University of London, The Careers Group, on Careers Literacy
- Julie Voce, Bloomsbury Learning Environment, on Digital Literacy

Further reading

[Three blog posts](#) develop these ideas somewhat further.

References

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook 1* (1st ed.). London: Longman Higher Education.

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