

Literacy in an Information Society

PATRICIA SENN BREIVIK

At one time people were considered literate if they could write their names. But society has grown more complex, and today literacy is more appropriately defined as the ability of individuals to find, read, and evaluate the information needed to function as productive members of society. This expanded concept supports all the various literacies (for example, cultural, technical) inherent in the information age. To promote this broader notion of literacy, we must individually and collectively face and resolve two major issues.

First, educators must examine their programs in light of the ever-changing, information-abundant environment in which current and future generations must exist. To meet today's information needs, many educators are already moving away from prepackaged materials to resource-based learning. Placing less emphasis on lectures, textbooks, workbooks, reading lists, and reserve materials, they are directing their students toward resources from a variety of disciplines and from multiple information sources: on-line databases, videotapes, government documents, and journals.

This "resource-based learning" encompasses the resources of the school library media center, the community, and the world. Pushing back the walls of the classroom, it allows students to explore the many forms in which information appears. This variety allows for variances in preferred learning styles among students who may, for example, learn more comfortably with visual materials or computer-assisted mediums than solely with print materials. It also provides more up-to-date information than print materials and creates new possibilities for student work, such as video

term papers, audiotaped oral history, film criticism, and the like.

Second, citizens who are serious about improving teaching and learning must support their community, school, and academic library media centers. Once a means of education and a better life for many of the 20 million immigrants of the late 1800s and early 1900s, public libraries endure today as potentially the strongest and most far-reaching community resource for lifelong learning. But libraries need adequate funding to maintain their print and nonprint collections and to network with electronic databases, including those of other libraries. Despite initial costs, cooperative sharing among schools, the public, and academic libraries can achieve real savings over time.

With their expertise in information, its organization, and its technology, librarians complement teachers' subject area strengths. Such partnerships are now necessary for using real-world resources to achieve learning objectives for courses. But face it—such partner-

ships are difficult to achieve because librarians have image problems. That is, many educators do not perceive them as dynamic contributors to the learning process. But they can be—and should be! After children learn to read, teachers and librarians must work together to have children learn how to find and use information from CD-ROMs, networks, audiotapes, and so on.

Knowing how to locate and select the information they need is a means of personal empowerment for students. It allows them to verify or refute expert opinion and to become independent seekers of truth. By letting students experience the excitement of their own successful quests for knowledge, this kind of literacy creates the motivation for pursuing learning throughout their lives. In our efforts to combat illiteracy, information literacy—not just teaching people to read—should be our goal. □

Patricia Senn Breivik is Associate Vice President for Information Resources, Towson State University, Towson, MD 21204.

In the October issue . . . "Curriculum Integration"

Educational Leadership profiles school programs designed to make curriculum more meaningful for students by highlighting the natural relationships among school subjects.

- David Perkins emphasizes the need to teach for understanding, to help students make learning connections.
- James Beane argues for integrated curriculum planning at the middle school level, where he says the need is greatest and the opportunities most available.
- In a conversation with Ron Brandt, Heidi Hayes Jacobs, chief author of ASCD's *Interdisciplinary Curriculum*, suggests that the way to get started is to look for some of the natural overlaps between subjects, rather than trying to do too much too quickly.

Other articles describe the National Science Teachers Association's scope-and-sequence project; the potential and peril of Outcome-Based Education; and efforts to integrate the curriculum in California, Colorado, Maryland, Ontario, and elsewhere.

Plus, Elliot Eisner argues persuasively against a national curriculum, or even national standards of the sort being proposed.

COMING IN NOVEMBER: "Teacher Education and Professional Development"—articles on improving preservice and inservice teacher education and on career development and professionalization.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.