



I did! Brno is one of the best cities to visit in the world. That is precisely the direction of my talk today!

Photo by Tomas Luka, 2015



What is Literacy and Why Is It Important?

Rui A. Alves

Universidade do Porto

BIP, Language and literacy in migration context

Masaryk University, Erasmus+ BIP

Brno, 03.06.24



Photo by
Lukas Radek, 2014

THE CAPABILITIES APPROACH



Amartya Sen



Martha Nussbaum



Millet, 1858, First steps

- **Capabilities** are “**substantive freedoms**”, that is a set of opportunities to choose and to act. “Freedom to choose alternative combinations of functionings” (Sen, 1999)
- “Capabilities are not just abilities residing inside a person but also the freedoms or opportunities created by a combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic environment.” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 20)
- Principle of each person as an end. Focus on the individual.



CAPABILITIES (NUSSBAUM, 2011)



- **Combined capabilities** (substantial freedoms): individual abilities + political, social, economical conditions.
- **Internal capabilities**: states of the person, not fixed, but fluid and dynamic, e.g., intellectual and emotional capacities, personality, health, skills such as reading and writing
- Why distinguish both?
 - A society might be good at nurturing internal capabilities (through education), but then deny the opportunities to function accordingly; e.g., free speech / repression of speech; immigrants without legal rights
 - and the opposite: opportunities to function without the internal capabilities; e.g., a person can criticize the government, but lack the critical thinking to do so.



CAPABILITIES (NUSSBAUM, 2011)



- **Basic capabilities:** “innate faculties of the person that make later development and training possible”, “innate powers that are either nurtured or not nurtured” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 23- 24)
- Not hard-wired in the DNA. Need to be nurtured at least until a threshold level of combined capability is attained. Related views are those of human flourishing and self-realization.
- They need to be nurtured in the same sense that Adam Smith said that deprivation of education made people “mutilated and deformed in an... essential part of the character of human nature.”
- **Language** is basic capability.



FUNCTIONINGS



- **Functionings** are the active realizations of capabilities. “The various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen, 1999)
- Sen’s example: a person who is fasting and a person who is starving show the same functioning, but do not have the same capability. The person who fasts has a choice (a capability), the person starving has no choice.
- Functionings are the end-points of capabilities. **Reading** and **writing** are both functionings, but also capabilities insofar as they include abilities and the choice **not to** read, **not to** write



ILLITERACY AS STARVING



- “If one can perfectly admit that someone can reject reading, it is intolerable if he or she is, or believes it is rejected by reading. Being excluded from books –even from those there is no need of– is an enormous sadness, a solitude within solitude” [Pennac](#) (1993, p. 144), *Como um romance*
- The [10 rights of the reader](#): 1. not reading, 2. jumping pages, 3. not finishing a book, 4. rereading, 5. reading whatever, 6. fell in love by the novel characters, 7. reading wherever, 8. jump from book to book, 9. read aloud, 10. do not talk about what one has read.



NOT ALL CAPABILITIES ARE ALIKE



- Some are more important than others. Some are good, some silly (burping the alphabet), and some may be bad (cruelty).
- Some need education to reach **adult capability** and are seen as so important that their enforcement is compulsory. Mandatory, compulsory education.
- **Fertile capabilities** (Wolff & De Shallit, 2007 –fertile functionings and corrosive disadvantage –Matthew’s effect)
- Which capabilities are most valuable? “...which are the ones that a minimally just society will endeavor to nurture and support?” (Nussbaum, 2011, p. 28)
- Crucial to distinguishing them is the notion of human dignity and a life worthy of it (**central capabilities**).

CENTRAL CAPABILITIES



“a decent political order must secure to all citizens at least a threshold level of these **ten Central Capabilities**” (constitutional law)

1. Life
2. Bodily health
3. Bodily integrity
4. Senses, imagination, and thought
Literacy, numeracy, scientific training -Education
5. Emotions
6. Practical reason
7. Affiliation
8. Other species
9. Play
10. Control over one’s environment



Creating Capabilities

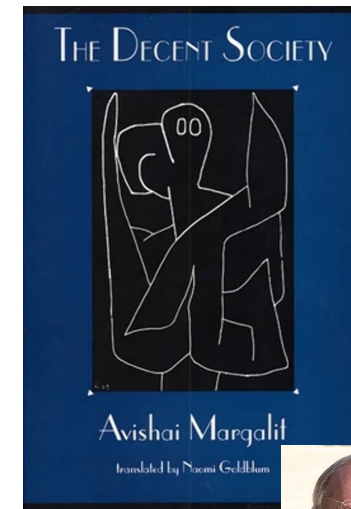
THE HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

THE DECENT SOCIETY



- It is one that promotes the central capabilities to at least a threshold level to allow social justice. The thresholds are to be settled by each nation keeping with their history and traditions. Nussbaum (2011)
- “A **decent society** is one whose **institutions do not humiliate** people... A civilized society is one whose members do not humiliate one another” Margalit (1996, p. 12)
- Choice is inherent to a capability. Governments should always provide citizens with choices. Nussbaum points out only **one exception**. No one should be given the option to be treated with respect and nonhumiliation (Nussbaum, penny example). **Dignity, respect, justice,** and **freedom** are cornerstones of the capabilities approach.



THE ESSENCE OF LANGUAGE AS SHELTER



Salgado, 1997, Kurd refugee camp of Hardin

- Silence: the heart of the condition is not of, but of the very signification and eloquent. The opposite of the word is not silence but - as we have just said - petition (rogare, imploring, requesting) and shelter (protection, welcome, - violence". Esquirol (2015, p. 138) / The book of Job
- house) as the two forms of the arch-gesture of language. Common greetings

THE COGNITIVE VIEW OF LANGUAGE



Language is a **unique** and **universal** faculty of the human species. The propensity to acquire language is **innate** but requires **exposure** to a language during the early years of life. As a consequence of this exposure, all human beings develop a **generative system** in their brains, which is responsible for the formulation of linguistic utterances that simultaneously perform **communicative** and **cognitive representation** functions. (Alves, 2013, p. 13; strongly influenced by Chomsky, 1987 and Miller, 1990)



LITERACY HAS A THOUSAND FACES



basic literacy, functional literacy, digital literacy, media literacy, oceanic literacy, cultural literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, civic literacy, scientific literacy, visual literacy, ecoliteracy, consumers literacy, emotional literacy, institutional literacy, affective literacy, seas literacy, humanist literacy



Threshold



OLSON'S (1999) LITERACY DEFINITION



"Literacy is competence with a written language, a script. This competence includes not only an individual's ability to read and write a script but also one's access to and competence with the documentary resources of a literate society. Literacy holds a prominent place in the political goals of both developed and developing nations as manifest in universal, compulsory education where literacy is seen as a means to personal, social, and economic fulfillment."

continues



OLSON'S (1999) LITERACY DEFINITION



"Literacy is a more general concept than reading and writing, including not only competence with and uses of reading and writing but also the roles that reading and writing play in the formation and accumulation of the procedures, laws, and texts that serve as the primary embodiment of historical culture. Literate, bureaucratic, or "document" societies are those in which such archival texts and documents play a central and authoritative role. Such societies depend on highly literate specialists."

Olson (1999) In The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences

LITERACY – EU’s HIGH-LEVEL GROUP REPORT



“Literacy as encompassing both reading and writing competences for understanding, using and critically evaluating different forms of information, including written, printed, electronic texts and images, and covering **baseline, functional, and multiple literacy**”

EU Council conclusions of 26 November 2012 on literacy, 393/1

CROSS-COMPETENCE

LEARNING TO LEARN

The ability to pursue and organise one's own learning, either individually or in groups, in accordance with one's own needs, and awareness of methods and opportunities.

LEVELS OF LITERACY

MULTIPLE LITERACY

The ability to use reading and writing skills in order to produce, understand, interpret and critically evaluate written information. It is a basis for digital participation and making informed choices pertaining to finances, health, etc.



FUNCTIONAL LITERACY

The ability to read and write at a level that enables someone to develop and function in society, at home, at school and at work.



BASELINE LITERACY

Having the knowledge of letters, words and text structures that is needed to read and write at a level that enables self-confidence and motivation for further development.

MULTIPLE NUMERACY

The ability and willingness to use mathematical modes of thought (logical and spatial thinking) and presentation (formulae, models, graphs, charts) that enable a person to fully function in a modern society.



FUNCTIONAL NUMERACY

The ability to apply basic mathematical principles and processes in everyday contexts at home, school and work (as needed for banking, payments, reading timetables, etc.).



BASELINE NUMERACY

Having a sound knowledge of numbers, measures and structures, basic operations, basic mathematical presentations and the ability to use appropriate aids that enable further development.

ENABLING AND FACILITATING COMPETENCES

DIGITAL COMPETENCE

The ability to use ICT to retrieve, assess, produce, present and exchange information. The ability to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet.

COMMUNICATION

The ability to express and interact linguistically in an appropriate and creative way in a full range of societal and cultural contexts.

LITERACY – EU’S HIGH-LEVEL GROUP



“Literacy is a crucial life competence which empowers the individual citizen to develop capacities of reflection, oral expression, critical thinking and empathy, boosting personal development, self-confidence, a sense of identity and full participation in a digital and knowledge economy and society”

EU Council conclusions of 26 November 2012 on literacy



European Union’s High-Level Group of Experts on Literacy Report, 2012

MEANWHILE WE HAD A COST ACTION (2014-19)



“Let us change the ideology of being powerful, the powerful countries shall not be judged by counting their soldiers and navy, but rather we must see which country has the higher literacy rate, which country has more educated people, which country has provided their basic rights to citizens”...“There is hope because you are all here, united to help these innocent children... they do not want an iPhone, an Xbox, a PlayStation or chocolates. They just want a book and a pen.”

Malala's Sakharov Prize speech, 2013



Malala Yousafzay

Strengthening Europeans' Capabilities
by Establishing the European Literacy
Network (ELN) COST Action IS1401

ELN'S MISSION (FROM THE CHARTER)



The **European Literacy Network (ELN)** is a worldwide **not-for-profit** network of **individual literacy researchers and practitioners** established by five former literacy COST Actions. The association fosters **networking** among its members, promotes **literacy research worldwide**, and aims to bridge the **gap** between **literacy science** and **education**. Networking, advancement of literacy research, and better literacy education are not ends in of themselves, but means to strengthen **individual researchers or practitioners capabilities**, improve **literacy education worldwide**, promote **human development**, and spread **humanistic values**.



ELN LITERACY DEFINITION



As a network, we proclaim **literacy** to be a critical tool for human development, freedom, and universal peace. Literacy is a **fertile capability**, representing a substantive freedom. At its core lies a **competence** with an external, permanent **script**. Developing this capability is ever more critical in present-day society, which is complex, bureaucratic, multilingual, and digital. Literacy underpins the way for a myriad of adaptive behaviors – especially the full realization of human potential and allowing for **effective participation** in communities and fostering **societal change**.

Effective participation in communities entails that **a threshold level** of literacy in a given area is attained. Written language is crucial to a wide range of literate practices, from accounting to literature, from law to science. This opens the way for a multitude of literacies; as it is often acknowledged that literacy can be qualified as digital, health, financial, civic, environmental, and so forth.



ELN LITERACY DEFINITION



Nevertheless, **not everything qualifies as literacy**, but as far as written language, documents and skills in managing literate resources play a role in the area highlighted by the adjective, that domain needs to be considered a specialization of the literate mind. Providing optimal conditions for threshold crossing to all children and adolescents **in core literacy areas** (e.g., reading, writing, math, science, humanities, arts) is a main duty of **universal education**. Furthermore, extending literacy to adults not only benefits individuals by promoting lifelong learning, economic stability, improved health, and personal development, but also strengthens the society by fostering greater civic participation, social responsibility, and community engagement.

ELN Charter 2/3



ELN LITERACY DEFINITION



Modern, digital, and highly bureaucratic societies rest on a wealth of documents, diverse technologies, and codified practices. As a result, **introducing societal change** normally requires **attaining an expert level** in a given area, so that effective change might be pursued. Providing means for transformative actions of society typically demands a set of literacy skills that are the focus of **higher education**. In conclusion, we acknowledge that in present-day bureaucratic societies, becoming literate implies **crossing two literacy thresholds**, one for allowing **effective participation**, and another for **pursuing societal changes**.

Defined this way, literacy is an extraordinary exercise of human freedom and flourishing. **Literacy is also just a tool, a means to an end**. As with any tool, thoughtful consideration needs to be taken about the plethora of goals and values that the tool might serve.



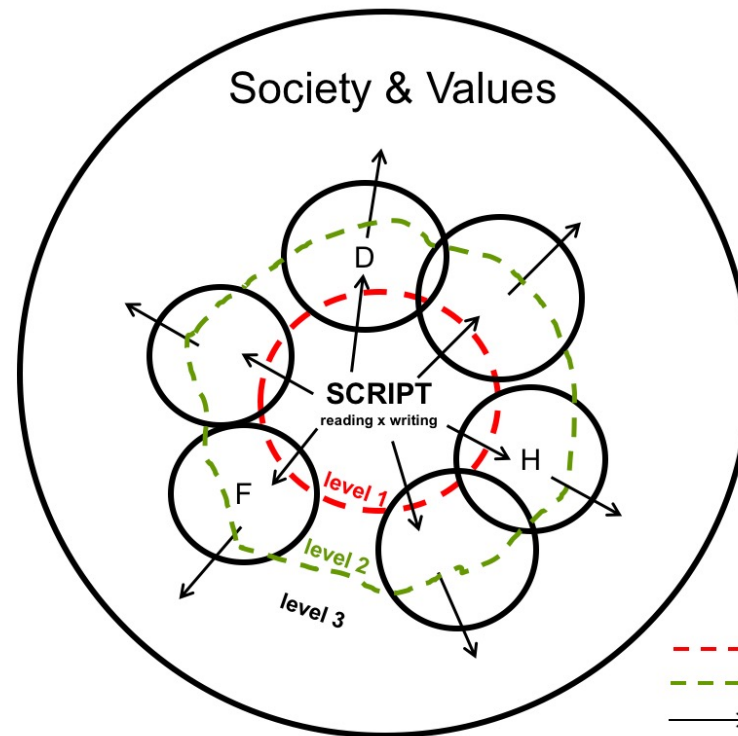
ELN LITERACY DEFINITION IN A NUTSHELL



Literacy is a fertile capability that has at its core a competence with a script. Development of this capability is ever more critical in present-day, complex **multilingual digital societies**, where literacy underpins the way for a myriad of **adaptive behaviors** –especially the full realization of **human potential** and allowing **effective participation** in literate communities and fostering **societal changes**. Effective participation in communities entails that a **threshold level** of literacy in a given area is attained. Providing optimal conditions for threshold crossing to all children is a main duty of **universal, compulsory education**. Since modern, digital, and highly bureaucratic societies rest on a wealth of documents, diverse technologies, and codified practices, introducing **societal changes**, often requires that an **expert level** in a given area is attained so that effective change might be pursued. Providing means for **transformative actions** of society typically imply a set of literacy skills that are the focus of **higher education**.



A SCHEME TO DEFINE LITERACY



Morais (2018)

Level - 1 Productive literacy

Level - 2 Argumentative literacy

Level - 3 Creative literacy

○ Literacy domains, multiple literacies

--- participation threshold

--- change threshold

→ unique paths

Alves (2019), chapter in *International Handbook of Language Acquisition*



LEVEL 1 – PRODUCTIVE LITERACY



- “bringing language into consciousness” (Olson, 1994, p. xxviii) writing is intrinsically metalinguistics: phonemes, syllables, words, sentences, discourse, genres.
- **Main challenges:** achieving automaticity of basic cognitive skills (e.g., decoding, handwriting, spelling) and a modicum of strategy (e.g., knowledge telling). Achieve effective representations of goals (i.e., writing, text).
- Achieving functional literacy. Able to function in literate worlds, participate and be productive. Automaticity (productivity) opens the doors to participation.



LEVEL 2 – ARGUMENTATIVE LITERACY



- Possibility to juggle several sources, evaluate, reflect upon and think critically. Behaving strategically, intentionally.
- **Main challenges:** achieving self-regulation of writing/literacy. Achieve effective representations of goals and self (i.e., texts and writer) and their interaction (self-regulation).
- Self-regulation and deliberate practice open the doors of change and innovation.



LEVEL 3 – CREATIVE LITERACY

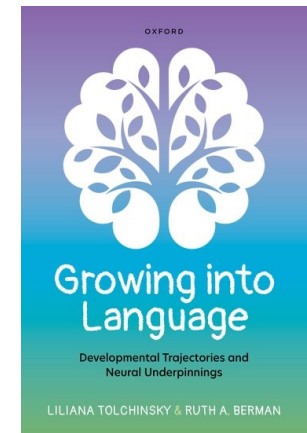


- The possibility that some literate feats can change the literate domain in which they are inscribed. Even if the feat is individual (rarely), it normally takes the concerted action of a community (others) and the necessary power to make the change effective.
- **Main challenges:** achieve effective representations of goals, self, and others (i.e., texts, writer, and readers) and allow for their interaction.
- Creativity and communities can introduce and sustain changes.

THINGS LITERACY ALLOWS YOU TO DO



- “in becoming literate, children change their conception of sounds, words, and sentences; they refine their sensitivity to the distinction between reported facts and inferences, between possible and counterfactual statements, between what is said and what is meant.” Tolchinsky & Berman, 2023, p. 253
- “Exposure to and use of written language in knowledge-based school activities challenges (and also enables) learners to expand their vocabulary, syntactic repertoire, and form-function mappings, as well as to use language appropriate to academic settings: all of these are needed for writing as an instrument of thought and becoming an active member of the textual community.” Tolchinsky & Berman, 2023, p. 260





THINGS LITERACY ALLOWS YOU TO DO

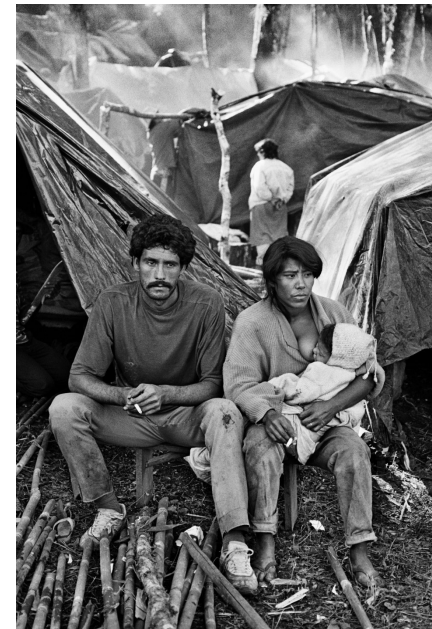


- Literacy is a tool for consciousness. “an instrument of thought”
- Literacy is an open-ended final to language development.
- Build awareness of goals, self, and others (i.e., texts, writers, and readers).
- Literacy is a form of freedom (capability) that allows participation in literate worlds. It can also be a source of societal changes.

LITERACY NEEDS OF MIGRANTS



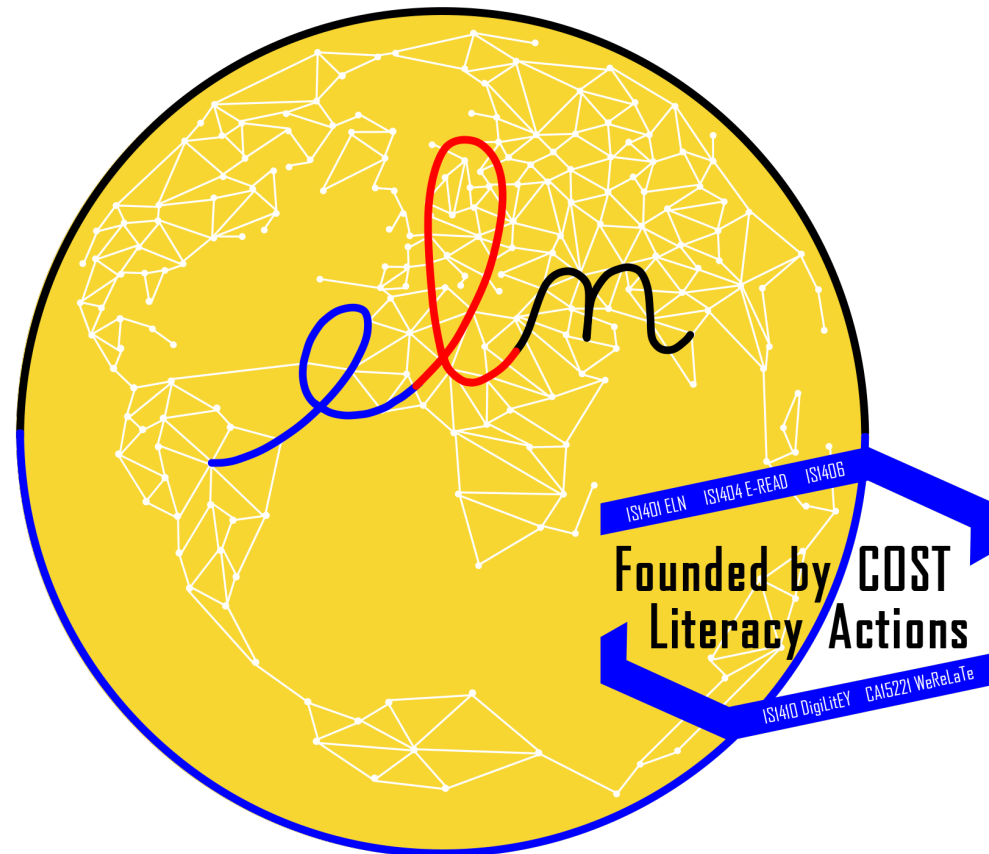
- Language as shelter, protection
 - Literacy as a measure of inclusion
 - Literacy as fertile functioning
 - Literacy as participation and change
 - Literacy as a fundamental human right
-
- Decent societies should care for and foster the literacy functionings of all citizens within their borders. Literacy is important because it is a means for human development and, coupled with universal human rights, a steward of decent societies.



Salgado, 1996



Join us at eln.eu





Come to the Literacy Summit, Submissions until July 26th

The poster features a scenic view of the University of Cologne buildings and the Gothic spires of St. Andrew's Church reflected in the Rhine river at sunset. The text is overlaid on this background.

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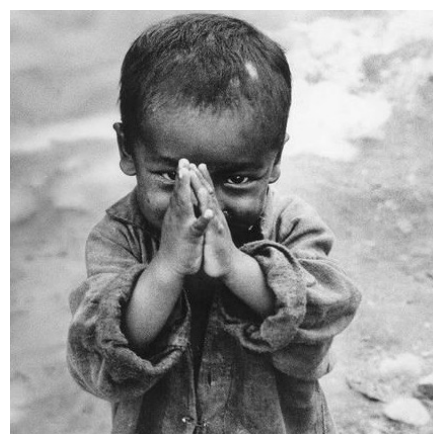
LITERACY x EDUCATION x AI

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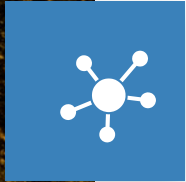


Photo by Lukas Radek, 2014