In recent years, “literacy” has been defined in a number of different ways and claimed by a number of different disciplines within education and related theory. Literacy is prefixed by words that reflect different educational movements, controversies, debates, and, occasionally, attempts to “sell” an educational solution in response to rapid societal and technological change. Thus, it is possible to find examples of any or all of the following in press, web pages, journals, and books of all kinds from the latter phases of the twentieth century through to the present day, from academic theory through to teacher and parental guidance: digital literacy, computer literacy, visual literacy, film literacy, information literacy, cultural literacy, games literacy, emotional literacy, and more, up to and including media literacy. Aligned to this at a metalevel are ways of grouping and conceptualizing “literacies” and later sections will address examples of these—namely, Multiliteracies and New Literacy Studies (Cope and Kalantzis 2000).

One key aspect that all the areas share, even within their various different theoretical perspectives, is an attempt to describe a process by which meanings are both transmitted and received, as well as a sphere in which competencies are developed, demonstrated, and measured. This is because the term “literacy” itself is inextricably linked with competency in reading and making messages and, therefore, with learning itself. Literacy is something to be acquired, a set of skills and dispositions that lead a person to be “literate.” The Concise Oxford English Dictionary (6th ed.) defines literacy as “the ability to read and write” (ed. Sykes 1979). To be a literate person is to be “educated” and “learned,” these meanings originating from Latin derivatives and in use in these senses since the fifteenth century. From the eighteenth century onward, literacy becomes further connected in its meaning
to the processes of learning itself, the step-by-step acquisition of knowledge of letters and how to use them (Hoad 1992).

For the many newer forms of literacy listed above, these competencies come in different forms for different purposes. Thus, apologists for “information literacy” propose teaching programs that place a high premium on reading, networking, and interpretive skills (November 2001). All of them, however, suggest a developing competence within the fields, which precede the word “literacy,” although some go well beyond competency and emphasize the mastery of empathy and other life skills (e.g., as in “emotional literacy”).

In recent years, further direct evidence of the connection between literacy and pedagogy came when “Literacy” began to supplant the term “English” as a subject in English primary schools. In 1998, a specific pedagogy was imposed by the government on primary schools in England, namely the step-by-step acquisition of a set of skills proposed in the National Literacy Strategy (DFES 1998). The Literacy hour prescribed teaching methods in primary schools which were intended to build sequentially, skill-by-skill, concept-by-concept, effectively atomizing learning about the processes of exchange and meaning making in all the constituent parts of National Curriculum English—namely, speaking and listening, reading, and writing. The result, although intended to be a comprehensive literacy program, was a greater emphasis on skills and metalevel analysis of text at the expense of active engagement with writing and publication by children. This continues in education systems at the moment and the various interventions aimed at stimulating creativity outside of narrow school systems is gaining ground in the after-school area, promoted by Dave Eggers in the United States and adopted here in London by some local initiatives (see, e.g., HackneyPirates 2012).

The burgeoning number of literacies listed in the opening to this section reflects many changes, not least among them are technological and societal changes that result in increased production and distribution in a variety of media. Alongside printed matter, across the developed world and in increasing areas of the undeveloped world, there is greater access to text, music, speech, video, and film on screens from televisions to computers to phones. There is more to be literate about and, because of the connection with pedagogy, more to educate about and more to be educated by. Literacy needs to be reframed as many have started to argue (Reid 2009).

In the late nineties, the New London Group proposed a collection of responses to the changing nature of literacy under the heading “Multiliteracies” (Cope and Kalantzis 2000), an attempt to describe and discuss the way literacy was moving in a world of accelerated change, together with plans for pedagogical responses to those changes within our education