

Article

Literacy Before It Counts: Legibility and Recognition of Adult Literacy Beyond Standardized Assessment

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Abstract

Within dominant policy discourses, adults who score poorly on standardized assessments are often positioned as deficient or lacking because they do not conform to institutionally valued forms of reading and writing. Although these adults often use literacy in complex ways in their daily lives, these vernacular (everyday, out-of-school) literacies do not count. Drawing on New Literacy Studies, recognition theory, and scholarship examining literacy across prisons, transnational families, historically marginalized communities, and multimodal contexts, this article examines how literacy becomes institutionally legible and socially recognizable. We argue that adults' sophisticated everyday literacy practices are institutionally undervalued because they do not align with dominant forms and expectations. Central to this analysis is a distinction between legibility and recognition: literacy may be institutionally illegible because it appears in forms institutions do not know how to read, or it may become legible while still being socially misrecognized and devalued. Adults must engage in costly translation labor to convert their literacies into institutionally acceptable forms and to access recognition, legitimacy, and opportunity. This article argues that literacy exists prior to institutional recognition and that adult literacy education must move beyond deficit-based frameworks toward broader understandings of literacy while still supporting adults' access to dominant literacies. Implications for adult literacy policy, assessment, instruction, and research are discussed.

Keywords: adult basic education; adult literacy; legibility; literacy assessment; multimodality; New Literacy Studies; recognition; standardized assessment; translation labor

1. Introduction

Adult literacy is often discussed through the language of deficiency, measurement, and remediation. International assessments such as the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) categorize adults according to literacy proficiency levels, frequently emphasizing the risks associated with limited literacy skills, including reduced employment opportunities, lower income, poorer health outcomes, and restricted civic participation (OECD, 2024). Within these frameworks, literacy appears measurable, stable, and transferable: a technical skill that individuals possess or lack to varying degrees. Adults who score poorly on literacy assessments are often positioned as “The Problem” (Belzer & Grotlüschen, 2022; see also Belzer & Pickard, 2015)—that is, needing intervention, improvement, support, or remediation to participate fully in economic, social, and civic life.

At one level, these concerns are materially important. Access to dominant literacy practices—literacies that are valued by employers, universities, government offices, and



Academic Editor: Grace Oakley

Received: 19 May 2026

Revised: 8 July 2026

Accepted: 10 July 2026

Published: 14 July 2026

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other institutions—matters. Reading, writing, numeracy, digital literacy, and oral language shape how adults navigate workplaces, healthcare systems, educational institutions, and bureaucratic processes and how they advocate for themselves and their communities. Adult basic education and literacy programs play a critical role in supporting adults who seek expanded access to these dominant literacies. As Janks (2010) argues, denying access to dominant literacies risks reproducing inequity because they continue to function as forms of social power. And yet, another tension emerges when we examine the literacy practices adults already engage in daily.

Adults categorized as having “low literacy” are often simultaneously participating in complex acts of meaning-making. They interpret institutional systems (e.g., Rogers, 2003), navigate digital platforms, sustain transnational family networks (e.g., Vieira, 2019), manage finances, read social situations, compose messages across life contexts, interpret religious or community texts (e.g., Shukla et al., 2025), help children with schoolwork, keep detailed community records (Salomon & Niño-Murcia, 2011), and make decisions about work, health, and survival, to name a few. These practices frequently require rhetorical awareness, linguistic flexibility, interpretation, and contextual reasoning. In other words, literacy is already present. Because these practices are embedded within everyday social life and practiced outside of institutions, they have been called out-of-school (Hull & Schultz, 2001), everyday, popular, or vernacular literacies (Iorio, 2015), as well as the “extracurriculum of composition” (Gere, 1994). By contrast, dominant literacies such as writing the five-paragraph essay are formalized, institutionalized, and school-like.

This gap between official labels and daily practice creates a contradiction. Adults may struggle with the forms of literacy measured through standardized assessments while simultaneously engaging in sophisticated literacy practices that are institutionally undervalued or entirely unrecognized. For instance, in their historical ethnography of writing in an Andean village, Salomon and Niño-Murcia (2011) note that when rural scribes and secretaries submit official paperwork in Lima, they can encounter “the scorn of notaries and ministerial clerks” (p. 191) due to minor errors in mechanical conventions such as spelling or handwriting. The community has kept meticulous written community records since colonization (and used *kipus*, or knotted cords, for centuries before that), yet minor deviations from the urban literacy standard mark them and their literacy as deficient. The issue, then, is not whether literacy exists, but how literacy comes to count (or not). This article asks: When does literacy count socially and institutionally, and when does it not, even when complex literacy practices are present? What forms of literacy remain illegible, undervalued, or misrecognized when they do not align with dominant expectations of what literacy should look like? As we argue throughout this article, learners are often required to do more than simply use literacy. They must also make their literacy intelligible within institutional systems that privilege particular forms, genres, languages, and communicative practices. This work, which we later describe as translation labor, is unevenly distributed. Some learners’ literacy practices are recognized almost automatically because they already align with institutional expectations, whereas others must continually reinterpret, reshape, or justify their literacies before they can count.

To explore these questions, we draw on New Literacy Studies (NLS), recognition theory, and scholarship examining literacy across prisons, migration, transnational families, and historically marginalized communities. Consistent with NLS and related multiliteracies scholarship, we understand literacy not as a singular, autonomous skill but as multiple socially situated practices that emerge across diverse linguistic, visual, embodied, spatial, relational, and print-based forms of meaning-making (Perry, 2012). Although many of the examples discussed here involve schools and other formal educational settings, the dynamics of legibility, recognition, and translation labor also operate across non-formal and

informal learning contexts, workplaces, community organizations, and other institutional spaces where specific literacy practices are privileged. Central to this analysis is a distinction between *legibility* and *recognition*. Legibility refers to whether literacy can be read within dominant institutional frameworks, whether it appears in forms institutions know how to interpret or *read*. Recognition refers to whether that literacy, once read, is socially valued (see [Honneth, 1995](#)). This distinction helps illuminate how literacy is filtered through systems of power that shape which literacies are allowed to count and under what conditions.

Importantly, this article does not argue that dominant literacy practices are unimportant or that literacy assessment should be abandoned. Rather, it argues that prevailing adult literacy frameworks often mistake particular *forms* or expressions of literacy for literacy itself. As [Brandt \(2001\)](#) reminds us, “the literacy that people practice is not necessarily the literacy they wish to practice” (p. 8), meaning we shouldn’t romanticize the limited opportunities that forged people’s literacy learning or assume people are content with the range of literacies they currently possess. Literacy practices are shaped by institutional demands, economic conditions, and systems of sponsorship that unevenly distribute access, legitimacy, and value. Expanding our understanding of literacy, therefore, requires holding two realities simultaneously: adults need access to dominant literacies because those literacies carry material consequences, and adults already engage in meaningful literacy practices that exceed the narrow frameworks through which literacy is commonly measured and recognized.

Drawing on texts such as *Writing from These Roots* ([Duffy, 2007](#)), *Reading Is My Window* ([Sweeney, 2010](#)), *Invitations to Love* ([Ahearn, 2001](#)), and *Writing for Love and Money* ([Vieira, 2019](#)), we argue that literacy often exists prior to institutional recognition. Across these texts, literacy does not emerge as something newly acquired through formal instruction alone. Rather, it is already relational, situated, embodied, and meaningful, though unevenly recognized depending on the terms through which it is being read. Ultimately, this article argues that literacy does not fail to count because it is absent. It often fails to count because the conditions that make literacy legible and recognizable are historically produced, socially uneven, and frequently exclusionary.

2. Adult Literacy, Assessment, and the Persistence of the Literacy Myth

Contemporary adult literacy discourse, particularly among policy makers and funders, is deeply shaped by the assumption that literacy is a key pathway to economic productivity and socioeconomic mobility (see, e.g., [Rothwell, 2020](#); [Yeoh & Chu, 2012](#)), as well as civic participation and related outcomes. This presumed causal link between literacy and economic development emerged during the Cold War, when literacy and education more broadly became “a development tool” ([Dorn & Ghodsee, 2012](#), p. 372) promoted by champions like Frank Laubach, the “Apostle of literacy” ([Cherewka & Prins, 2022](#)). More recently, international surveys such as the PIAAC have positioned literacy as a measurable competency necessary for participation in modern life, often linking literacy proficiency to individuals’ employability, health, technological participation, and democratic engagement ([OECD, 2024](#)) and to national indicators of economic competitiveness and social inclusion. The language surrounding adult literacy policy often reflects this orientation. Adults who perform poorly on standardized literacy assessments are frequently described using terms like “low-skilled,” “below proficiency,” “at risk,” or “lacking foundational skills.” Although these descriptors are intended to identify areas for educational support, they also narrow how learners themselves are imagined within literacy discourse. The adult learner becomes defined chiefly through deficiency (see [Valencia, 2010](#), on deficit thinking).

This framing has significant consequences. It shapes funding priorities, instructional models, assessment practices, and public understandings of adult literacy education. It

also risks obscuring the complexity of adults' literate lives by positioning institutional assessment as the primary way literacy becomes visible. And when adults internalize their test scores, they come to see themselves through the eyes of the institution (Rogers, 2003). Importantly, none of this means that literacy instruction lacks value. Adult basic education programs are critically important for adults seeking greater access to reading, writing, numeracy, and digital participation. Many adults pursue literacy education precisely because limited access to dominant literacies carries profound material and symbolic consequences and because it is personally meaningful and confers valuable psychosocial benefits (Prins, 2005, 2006, 2008).

However, institutional literacy frameworks often equate literacy with the forms of literacy they can measure most easily, or by means of what is most familiar. This tension is not new. Graff and Duffy (2010) argued that the persistent "Literacy Myth" continues to frame literacy as an "autonomous" force (Street, 1993) capable of producing "economic advancement, democratic practice, cognitive enhancement and upward social mobility" (p. 35) independent of sociocultural contexts. Instead, literacy's effects are embedded in and mediated by social, political, and economic structures, sociocultural practices, and power relations. Within this framing, literacy is never neutral. It is always shaped by social expectations regarding language, knowledge, authority, and legitimacy.

These critiques are vital in adult literacy because adults deemed "low literate" are often simultaneously engaged in complex acts of meaning-making that exceed what standardized assessments are designed to measure. Adults compare lease agreements and employment contracts, navigate immigration and social services, interpret medical and pharmaceutical information, coordinate caregiving across households, and read religious texts. And yet, these forms of literacy frequently are institutionally secondary, if valued at all, because they do not align neatly with the print-centered and standardized forms most easily measured and rewarded through institutional assessment frameworks. Freire (1985) reminds us that in acquiring literacy we develop new ways of interpreting and acting in the world. New Literacy Studies similarly reframed literacy not as a single, transferable skill, but as multiple socially situated practices embedded in culture and history (Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984). From this perspective, literacy is always relational, contextual, and shaped by the social worlds in which it operates.

Scribner and Cole's (1981) study of Vai literacy in Liberia remains foundational here. Their work challenged assumptions that literacy per se automatically produces universal cognitive consequences by demonstrating that different literacy practices are associated with different social uses and outcomes. That is, they showed that what literacy did to people depended on what they did with it. Literacy does not function identically across contexts because literacy practices themselves differ. Brandt and Clinton (2002) extended this conversation by cautioning against reducing literacy to a purely local practice. Although literacy is always socially situated, they argue that it also circulates through institutional, material, and transcontextual systems that shape how literacy acquires value, legitimacy, and meanings across contexts and scales. This distinction matters because institutional assessments often isolate particular literacy performances while ignoring the social relationships, institutional forces, and lived literacy practices that shape how adults make meaning in everyday life.

The implications for adult literacy education are significant. If literacy is socially situated and shaped by institutional systems, then standardized assessments can only capture particular literacy performances—reading a medicine label, interpreting a bus schedule, calculating tax on a purchase—rather than literacy in its entirety. This does not render assessment meaningless, but it does highlight the limitations of what assessments can recognize. Heath's (1983) classic study, *Ways with Words*, demonstrated how schools often privilege the literacy practices of dominant racial and cultural groups while misrecognizing

or overlooking other complicated forms of language and meaning-making. Institutional systems frequently position these literacy differences hierarchically and prescriptively. This disjuncture becomes especially consequential in adult literacy education because adults often enter programs with already established literacy practices—inchoate or developed, and with or without others' assistance—that are shaped through work, migration, caregiving, religion, incarceration, multilingualism, survival, community participation, and more. Adult literacy education, therefore, does not begin with institutionally perceived literacy absence. More often, it begins with institutional mismatch.

3. Key Concepts

3.1. *Literacy Sponsorship, Access, and Dominant Literacies*

Any attempt to broaden what counts as literacy must avoid romanticizing exclusion from dominant literacy practices (Prins, 2010). As noted earlier, limited access to dominant literacies carries material consequences, including restricted educational, economic, and institutional opportunities. Janks' (2010) work is important here because she refuses simplistic binaries between dominant and non-dominant literacies. She argues that critical literacy requires attention to four interrelated dimensions: domination, access, diversity, and design. Validating diverse literacy practices matters, yet access to dominant literacies is also necessary because dominant literacies continue to structure institutional participation and social mobility. At the same time, access alone cannot be the endpoint of adult literacy education because it requires continual assimilation into narrow institutional literacy norms such as standardized academic English, print-centered assessment practices, or formal academic genres. Adult learners are often expected to acquire dominant literacies without institutions and their representatives questioning why those literacies became dominant, whose communicative practices they privilege, or what other forms of literacy are ignored or devalued in the process.

Brandt's (2001) concept of literacy sponsorship further complicates these ideas. Literacy sponsors are "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (p. 19). Sponsors include bureaucratic institutions, employers, schools, religious organizations, governments, economic systems, and the military, to name a few. Sponsors do not merely support literacy neutrally; they shape what forms of literacy become economically valuable, institutionally legitimate, socially recognizable, and materially consequential. Literacy sponsors influence access to opportunity while also reinforcing particular definitions of legitimate literacy. This insight helps illuminate why adults may use literacy in rich, meaningful ways while still being positioned institutionally as lacking literacy when their practices do not align with those rewarded by dominant systems.

These institutional contradictions reveal a deeper tension within adult literacy education. Adults may simultaneously (a) seek greater access to dominant literacies because those literacies carry material consequences; (b) already use literacy in sophisticated ways; and (c) experience institutional systems that do not recognize their forms of literacy as legitimate. The issue is less about whether adults possess literacy than how unequal literacy economies determine which literacies become visible, rewarded, and institutionally consequential. Expanding institutional recognition of broader literacy practices does not eliminate the reality that educational systems, workplaces, credentialing structures, and public institutions continue distributing resources and opportunities through dominant literacy norms. The choice between validating vernacular literacies *or* supporting access to dominant literacies is false; adult literacy education must do both simultaneously.

3.2. Legibility: The Conditions of Being Read

To better understand why certain literacy practices count while others do not, we propose a distinction between legibility and recognition. Legibility refers to whether literacy practices can be read, interpreted, and made meaningful within dominant institutional frameworks. Legibility is not about whether literacy exists but whether literacy appears in forms institutions know how to recognize. This distinction matters because literacy does not enter institutional spaces as a neutral object awaiting evaluation. It enters through systems already shaped by assumptions about what literacy should look like. Standardized grammar, citation conventions, essay structures, formal genres, and particular linguistic styles—more “school-like” literacies—function as signals of “legitimate” literacy. Literacy that aligns with these expectations becomes easier to read institutionally; it becomes legible.

This concept helps extend a central insight of New Literacy Studies: the persistent disconnect between dominant and vernacular literacies (Street, 1993). The issue, however, is not merely difference. Certain literacies are more institutionally legible than others. Baker-Bell’s (2020) analysis of white linguistic supremacy makes this especially clear. Dominant literacy standards are not neutral linguistic preferences; they are historically racialized norms that position standardized white English as the benchmark for intelligence, correctness, and legitimacy. Black Language (and by extension, all other ways of using English that do not conform to “standardized white English”) is therefore not simply treated as different but often rendered deficient even though it demonstrates rhetorical complexity and communicative competence. Legibility, then, is structured through power. Institutional systems determine which linguistic forms, genres, and literacy performances can be read as evidence of literacy in the first place.

3.3. Recognition: The Politics of Value

If legibility determines whether literacy can be seen, recognition determines whether it is valued. Honneth (1995) conceptualizes recognition as a fundamental social (intersubjective) process through which individuals are deemed, and come to experience themselves as capable, valuable, and worthy, including via interactions with economic and administrative institutions. Recognition is not simply visibility. It involves social valuation. Applied to literacy, this means that institutions may acknowledge a literacy practice as meaningful communication while still treating it (and the person behind it) as less rigorous, intelligent, professional, or legitimate. That is, literacy can be institutionally *visible* without becoming equally *valued*. Misrecognition is therefore not merely a failure to *see* literacy; it is an active process through which certain literacy practices are interpreted as inferior, inappropriate, insufficiently rigorous, or irrelevant. Again, Baker-Bell’s (2020) work is instructive. Black students may demonstrate complex, creative linguistic and rhetorical practices while still being evaluated through deficit-oriented frameworks because institutional standards privilege particular forms of language.

This distinction reveals multiple possibilities: (a) Literacy may be illegible because institutions do not recognize it as literacy at all; (b) literacy may be legible but misrecognized because institutions devalue the forms it takes; or (c) literacy may become recognizable only after translation into institutional terms. Recognition does not operate neutrally. Institutions help produce the very conditions and standards under which literacy becomes recognizable in the first place.

These dynamics matter because institutions often present their literacy standards as objective measures of competence rather than historically produced systems of valuation. Standardized genres, academic discourse conventions, dominant language expectations, and institutional forms of communication can appear neutral only because they have become normalized. But normalization is not neutrality. Institutional recognition systems

determine whose literacy practices are treated as evidence of intelligence, rigor, and capability, and whose are marked as insufficient, informal, or incomplete. Some forms of literacy arrive already aligned with institutional expectations. Others must undergo continual translation before they count.

Fraser's (2000) critique of recognition politics sharpens this tension. She argues that recognition alone cannot resolve structural inequality because systems may acknowledge marginalized identities or practices while leaving institutional systems of valuation largely unchanged. This caution matters deeply within adult literacy education. Literacy programs may invite multilingual expression, personal narratives, multimodal composition, spoken word, or community-based literacy practices into classrooms while still evaluating rigor mainly through standardized academic English, print-centered assessment, or dominant academic genres. Similarly, institutions may rhetorically celebrate linguistic diversity while continuing to treat certain language practices as more professional, credible, or employable than others. In such cases, recognition becomes conditional (tokenistic) rather than transformative. Marginalized literacy practices become institutionally acceptable only once they are translated into recognizable frameworks of legitimacy and rigor. Institutions may appear expansive by selectively incorporating marginalized literacy practices while still preserving the dominant evaluative frameworks through which literacy is judged. What changes, then, is the range of practices institutions are temporarily willing to incorporate, not the underling literacy hierarchy.

This distinction is noteworthy because institutional recognition or authority often remain intact even as broader forms of literacy become more visible. Literacy practices are not necessarily valued on their own terms; rather, they become recognizable or valued once they can be mapped onto dominant expectations regarding rigor, correctness, productivity, professionalism, or academic legitimacy. Recognition, in this sense, can operate less as transformation and more as absorption. Institutions may be willing to recognize broader forms of literacy, but are they willing to reimagine the standards through which literacy becomes recognizable in the first place? Without such shifts, institutional recognition risks expanding representation while leaving intact the literacy hierarchies that produced exclusion.

4. Literacy Under Constraint: *Reading Is My Window*

Sweeney's (2010) *Reading Is My Window* offers a powerful example of literacy operating within strict institutional confinement. Working within women's prisons, Sweeney documented reading practices that are deeply interpretive, relational, and purposeful. Women read not simply to decode text, but to process trauma, reflect on and reshape their identities, sustain hope, resist isolation, and make sense of their experiences outside and within prison. Reading became a form of survival and self-preservation within institutions structured to constrain autonomy. Importantly, Sweeney's research participants were not disengaged from literacy. If anything, literacy became intensified under confinement. This study reveals that readers engage texts dialogically, interpreting and connecting them to their own lives in ways that demonstrate rhetorical and interpretive complexity.

Yet not all reading practices are recognized equally. Sweeney discusses how incarcerated women's preferences for urban fiction, victimization memoirs ("mis lit"), and self-help books are often dismissed as lacking intellectual seriousness even while readers use those texts in surprising, sophisticated ways. For example, women read these genres to grapple with race, violence, gender, grief, and trauma, to experiment with new ways of being, to practice self-care, and to "re-story" their past and future. Sweeney's analysis reveals that scholars have created a moral and intellectual hierarchy of legitimate reading in which certain forms of reading (those preferred by the women in Sweeney's study) are treated as respectable while others are culturally suspect, despite the complexity of the

meaning-making practices involved. The issue, therefore, is not whether literacy exists within prisons but rather which forms of reading institutions and broader cultural systems are willing to recognize as meaningful, rigorous, or worthy of value.

5. Literacy and Social Change: *Invitations to Love*

Ahearn's (2001) *Invitations to Love* complicates the relationship between literacy and recognition by demonstrating how literacy practices can actively reshape social relations. Through her study of love letters in Nepal, Ahearn examined how literacy became entangled with changing ideas regarding love and romance, agency, gender, and modernity. Love letters were not merely written texts; they functioned as social acts through which individuals negotiated identity, intimacy, and social possibility. For young women especially, literacy opened space for articulating desire and relational choice in ways that disrupted established social expectations as marriages shifted from arranged to "love marriages." Literacy became tied not simply to communication, but to emerging forms of agency and social change. These literacy practices were not universally celebrated. Love letters and women's expressions of writing were sometimes viewed as morally threatening, socially disruptive, or culturally inappropriate precisely because they enabled new forms of relational autonomy.

Ahearn's work highlights an important dimension of recognition: literacy is evaluated not only according to form, but according to what literacy does socially. Literacy practices that reinforce dominant norms are more likely to receive institutional and cultural validation. Literacy practices that disrupt social hierarchies, gender expectations, or institutional authority often become more difficult, or even impossible, to legitimize, even when they demonstrate rhetorical sophistication. Literacy, then, is never merely technical. It is always entangled with broader struggles over authority, legitimacy, and social power.

6. Relational Literacy and Institutional Misalignment: *Writing for Love and Money*

Vieira's (2019) *Writing for Love and Money* offers one of the clearest challenges to narrow institutional definitions of literacy by centering literacy practices rooted in migration, care, and family survival. Within the Brazilian and Latvian transnational families she studied, writing became a way of sustaining relationships across distance, managing financial and familial obligations, and navigating migration systems. These transnational literacy practices include letters, digital communication, remittance coordination, language teaching and learning, and multilingual negotiation using older and newer technologies. Vieira's research shows that these practices require rhetorical flexibility, emotional labor, and the ability to navigate multiple audiences, cultural expectations, and institutional systems simultaneously. And yet, these forms of literacy rarely align with dominant institutional measures of literacy achievement. Because they are relational, contextual, and collective rather than standardized and individually assessed, they remain institutionally undervalued. Vieira's work reveals a mismatch between the literacy practices institutions prioritize and the literacy practices adults often rely on most heavily in their daily lives. The literacies Vieira documents, however, are relational, transnational, and embedded within networks of care and survival. Here, again, the issue is institutional misalignment, not the absence of literacy.

7. The Political Production of Preliteracy: *Writing from These Roots*

Duffy's (2007) *Writing from These Roots* extends these concerns historically by examining Hmong "rhetorics of literacy" and challenging dominant narratives that positioned the Hmong as "preliterate." Duffy argues that the label preliteracy obscures the histor-

ical, institutional, social, and material conditions through which literacy is suppressed, restricted, or rendered invisible. Rather than lacking literacy, Hmong communities engaged in longstanding storytelling, oral traditions, cultural narration, and literacy practices across multiple scripts, languages, nations, and historical periods. Indeed, the myth of lost writing is central to their cultural identity. Duffy documents how Hmong adults in Laos were military scribes (and in turn used their literacy skills to keep journals, write autobiographies, and more) and practiced religious literacies associated with Christian missionaries. As refugees in the USA, they provided translation for community organizations, wrote letters to the editor to contest cultural stereotypes, and recorded their cultural histories. Yet, the preliteracy label renders such practices institutionally marginal or historically invisible.

Duffy argues that “preliteracy” “obscure[s] the historical processes through which literacy is promoted or suppressed” (Duffy, 2007, p. 19) and how historical forces shape what and how people are reading and writing in particular moments and places and whether or not these practices are recognized. This historical dimension is important because standards for what counts as literacy are often treated as natural, universal, or inevitable rather than historically produced. As Duffy argues, literacy development itself “is a product of institutional expressions of and struggles for power, material and symbolic, local and global, that shape the discrete acts of individual readers and writers” (Duffy, 2007, p. 107).

Duffy’s work reveals that literacy illegibility is neither accidental nor merely contemporary. Institutions have long participated in determining which literacy traditions become historically visible and which are epistemically marginal or erased altogether. Questions of literacy, therefore, are also questions of memory, preservation, and legitimacy: what gets archived, researched, remembered, and institutionally validated, and what does not? When literacy is defined narrowly, certain forms of meaning-making become excluded not only from classrooms but from literacy history itself. The consequences extend beyond individual recognition toward broader forms of epistemic inequality, where entire communicative traditions risk disappearance because they fall outside dominant institutional frameworks. In this sense, Duffy’s work pushes literacy scholarship beyond questions of individual competency toward questions of collective memory, historical visibility, institutional power, and the political production of “preliteracy” itself.

8. The Politics of Mode: Multimodality and Institutional Legibility

The tension between institutional literacy expectations and broader literacy practices becomes especially visible when literacy operates multimodally. Multiliteracies scholarship challenged narrow print-centered models of literacy by emphasizing that meaning is produced across multiple communicative modes and social contexts (New London Group, 1996). Kress and Rowsell (2019) similarly argue that contemporary literacy practices operate across visual, linguistic, spatial, gestural, and other semiotic forms that shape meaning-making beyond print alone. Yet, institutions often continue privileging print-based communication as the primary marker of legitimate literacy.

This institutional privileging matters because adults engage multimodal literacy practices in everyday life. Adults interpret visual instructions, navigate symbolic systems such as transit maps, workplace icons, medical forms, and digital interfaces; compose messages integrating image, sound, video, and text, communicate through embodied and spatial practices; and participate in visual cultures that require sophisticated interpretation. And yet, multimodal literacy practices often are institutionally secondary within literacy assessment frameworks. This reveals another important dimension of legibility: institutions are not simply evaluating literacy; they are also evaluating mode. Certain forms of communication are granted greater legitimacy than others. Standardized literacy assessment privileges print not because other communicative modes lack complexity, but because print-based

forms are easier to standardize, compare, rank, and incorporate into formal systems of assessment, credentialing, and evaluation.

The consequences become especially significant for adults whose strengths emerge through visual, oral, embodied, multilingual, or otherwise non-print literacy practices. In educational settings especially, multimodal literacy practices may demonstrate rhetorical complexity while being institutionally precarious because they do not align with dominant academic genres or assessment structures. In such moments, the problem is whether institutions possess the interpretive flexibility to recognize existing literacies outside already normalized forms. Institutional recognition frequently depends upon translation: literacy practices must be rendered into familiar or expected forms and modes accepted by the institution. The following classroom example illustrates how this process unfolds in practice.

9. A Form That Did Not Count—Until It Did

This example, drawn from the first author's teaching experience, illustrates how non-standard literacies had to be translated for the institution to recognize their legitimacy. I (first author) want to be careful here, because this is not a story about suddenly noticing literacy where I had not seen it before. I have long believed, and still do, that learning and literacy are happening all the time, in all kinds of spaces, whether or not schools or institutions are paying attention. What continues to unsettle me is something different: what happens when literacy is clearly present, even rigorously developed, and still struggles to count institutionally.

I often think about Rae (pseudonym), a student in a senior capstone-style research course I taught at a nontraditional, competency-based secondary school designed for students who were not well served by traditional schools. The assignment was a 15-page research paper with sources, citations, and an original argument—the kind of project that signals readiness, completion, and legitimacy, the kind of literacy schools know how to recognize. Rae struggled almost immediately. He could not find a topic he cared about. The reading felt disconnected from him. The paper's length felt impossible. Over time, that frustration began to harden into disengagement, deflection, a kind of practiced "coolness" that made it easy not to try too hard and easier still not to be read too closely. But I knew Rae beyond that classroom version of himself. During a school break, he had stayed in my home because he was not welcome to return home at that time. Outside the classroom, his guard softened. What emerged was care, attentiveness, humor, and thoughtfulness. He was observant, deeply capable, and already a serious visual artist who had completed commissioned work. He understood revision, composition, detail, and audience in deep, complex ways that were anything but disengaged.

Eventually, we began asking a different question: Not *how do you get through this paper?* But *how might you do this work in a form that makes sense to you?* What emerged, through several conversations and collaboration with the art teacher, was first a storyboard proposal and eventually a graphic narrative project. Or perhaps more accurately, a full visual argument. Rae created a comic-style project examining depictions of women across manga and related genres. His claim that these depictions were not problematic was not ultimately the point for me, nor did I agree with this position. What mattered was the sophistication of the literacy work itself.

He created characters representing different historical moments and stylistic traditions. Their clothing, speech, and visual design reflected the positions they embodied. They argued and battled with one another across panels. They cited sources through dialogue boxes. Quotes became interaction. Counterarguments became conflict. The structure of the argument was expressed spatially and visually. You could follow his reasoning, his evidence, his tensions, and his revisions. The project was careful. Deliberate. In many

ways, it demanded more rhetorical decision making than the traditional paper would have. He was not avoiding the intellectual work of the assignment. He was engaging it intensely, though through a mode the institution was less prepared to recognize. The art teacher and I worked closely to ensure the project met English language arts and visual arts competencies. When the project was completed, I determined that Rae had earned full credit, not as an act of generosity, but because the work had fully met, and in some ways exceeded the intellectual demands of the assignment.

And that is where things became complicated. The project did not immediately “count” institutionally. The director of curriculum and head of school became involved. Questions emerged regarding rigor, alignment, and whether the project could legitimately stand in for the kind of literacy the assignment was designed to assess. The concern was never that the project lacked complexity, but that it did not look like the forms of literacy the institution was accustomed to recognizing as academically legitimate. We held multiple meetings, though without Rae, because I did not want him to experience, in real time, the possibility that his work might be institutionally dismissed after investing so much of himself in it. What I found myself doing, over and over, was translating his project into institutional language. I mapped visual choices onto rhetorical competencies. I identified research skills, argumentative structures, and standards alignment. I worked to make legible what I knew to be there. Eventually, I demonstrated that Rae had met or exceeded the expectations of the assignment. The project ultimately received institutional approval because the literacy practices embedded within it could be translated successfully into forms that the institution already knew how to value.

But that resolution has never felt settled to me. What stayed with me was not simply that Rae succeeded. It was how much labor was required for his literacy to become institutionally recognizable at all, and how contingent that recognition was upon my ability to re-present his work through dominant academic frameworks. The literacy itself was never in question. What was in question was whether the institution knew how to *see* it, and perhaps more unsettlingly, whether the institution had ever been designed to see it in the first place. What this experience continues to surface for me is not whether literacy is present, but whether it is legible; and once legible, whether it is recognized as valuable within the terms the institution is willing to accept (Baker-Bell, 2020; Honneth, 1995; Street, 1993).

10. Translation Labor

One important, and often invisible, consequence of institutional legibility frameworks is the uneven distribution of translation labor. Originating in research on translation between languages (Wang, 2020a, 2020b), translation labor is also a useful way to examine how people make their literacy practices legible to institutions. Adults whose literacy practices already align with dominant institutional norms are often read as competent automatically, without needing to explain, defend, or reinterpret their communication practices. For instance, Salomon and Niño-Murcia (2011) argue, standardlike usage provides “clues about whether the writer is a person who must be taken seriously” (p. 191). Others, however, must engage in continual acts of translation for their literacy to count. This labor may involve code-switching, suppressing vernacular language practices, reshaping multimodal communication into print-centered forms, adopting institutional discourse conventions, or learning how to perform literacy in ways recognizable to dominant systems. This labor extends beyond language alone. Translation labor is also emotional, relational, cognitive, and epistemic. Adults are often required to monitor how they speak, write, present themselves, organize ideas, express emotion, cite knowledge, structure arguments, or communicate authority to avoid being read as unprofessional, unintelligent, underprepared, or illegitimate. In many institutional spaces, individuals must not only demonstrate

knowledge but also demonstrate it in institutionally sanctioned ways. What institutions frequently reward, then, is not literacy alone, but institutional familiarity: fluency in the norms, genres, tones, and communicative expectations dominant systems have already decided signify competence. The reward is being taken seriously.

This uneven burden is often invisible precisely because dominant literacy norms are framed as neutral, objective, or universal rather than historically produced and socially situated. Institutional literacy expectations appear natural to those already aligned with them. But for adults whose literacy practices emerge through multilingualism, migration, oral traditions, community rhetorics, embodied communication, incarceration, visual culture, vernacular language practices, or the suppression of formal education, institutional participation requires continual self-translation. The challenge is not just learning new literacy practices; it is learning how to render oneself readable to institutions that often refuse to expand what they are willing to read.

However, translation itself is not inherently negative. Adults often move strategically across literacy practices, languages, modes, and communicative contexts in highly sophisticated ways. We do this every day when changing how we talk and use literacy among family, colleagues, or authority figures. Multilingualism, code-switching, and rhetorical adaptability can reflect communicative expertise. The problem emerges when institutional systems position translation as a one-sided obligation rather than a shared responsibility. Too often, institutions demand that learners adapt yet leave institutional literacy norms unquestioned. Under these conditions, adults are expected not merely to communicate, but to continually reshape themselves into institutionally acceptable forms to access legitimacy, opportunity, and recognition.

These expectations matter because continual translation is exhausting. It requires ongoing self-monitoring regarding tone, language, genre, appearance, emotional expression, and communicative style. It can flatten rhetorical complexity, discourage experimentation, and pressure individuals to suppress forms of expression deeply connected to identity, culture, or community belonging. Over time, the burden of translation can become so normalized that institutions mistake successful adaptation for evidence that their literacy expectations were neutral all along. Yet what often appears as seamless institutional participation may instead reflect hidden labor by individuals navigating systems never designed with their literacy practices in mind.

11. Conclusions

This article has argued that literacy does not fail to count because it is absent but rather because the conditions that make literacy recognizable are historically produced, socially uneven, and entangled with power. Across prisons, transnational families, historically marginalized communities, and classrooms, adults engage literacy practices that are relational, adaptive, and meaningful. These practices involve interpretation, rhetorical awareness, emotional labor, survival, and social navigation. Yet, dominant literacy frameworks still fail to recognize or value them because they do not align with institutional expectations of what literacy should look like, sound like, or accomplish. Differentiating legibility and recognition helps clarify this tension. Literacy may be illegible because it appears in forms institutions do not read, or it may become legible while still being misrecognized because it does not conform to dominant expectations of rigor, legitimacy, or value. In either case, the issue is not literacy's absence, but the institutional conditions that determine what literacy becomes visible and consequential in the first place.

Expanding what counts as literacy does not require abandoning support for foundational academic skills or dominant literacy practices. Adults deserve access to the literacies that shape institutional participation, employment, education, and public life. But access

alone is not enough if institutions remain structured around narrow definitions of literacy. Too much of the burden falls on individuals to become legible to institutional systems while institutions are rarely asked to reconsider the literacy norms through which they evaluate people. Across the contexts explored in this article, adults were repeatedly required to translate their literacy practices into institutionally acceptable forms to be recognized. For example, Rae's graphic narrative had to be mapped carefully onto academic standards before it could count, and the women in Sweeney's study participated in interpretive reading practices that were culturally devalued because they deviated from dominant expectations of legitimate reading. In each case, literacy was never absent. What remained limited was the institution's willingness, or ability, to recognize literacy beyond specific expectations of form, language, genre, and mode.

Adult literacy education requires more than helping adults learn dominant literacies. It also requires institutions to confront the assumptions embedded within their own literacy standards. When institutions refuse to question how their definitions of rigor, intelligence, legitimacy, and communication were constructed in the first place, learners are left carrying the unequal burden of continual translation, repeatedly reshaping themselves into forms institutions already know how to value.

This asymmetry matters because institutional standards are never merely descriptive; they shape whose literacy counts, whose knowledge becomes credible, whose communication practices become valuable, and whose meaning-making remains marginal. When literacy is reduced exclusively to standardized forms and measurable competencies, institutions mistake particular literacy performances for literacy itself. The challenge, therefore, is not simply to recognize more literacies after they have already been translated into dominant institutional terms. It is to investigate the conditions that determine which literacies become recognizable in the first place and to discern which literacies institutions have been unwilling to learn how to see.

Although this article focuses on adults positioned as "lacking" literacy, the framework developed here may also extend beyond adult literacy education. Similar dynamics of legibility, recognition, and translation labor shape participation within institutions themselves, where educators, administrators, researchers, and others continually negotiate changing communicative expectations in order for their work to count. For example, academics often have to make financial and career-oriented "business cases" for their courses or programs. Exploring how these dynamics operate across institutional contexts represents a promising direction for future research.

If certain literacies remain persistently illegible despite their sophistication and social significance, then the problem does not lie with individuals categorized as lacking literacy. The problem lies with institutions too invested in their own definitions of literacy to recognize humanity, intelligence, and meaning-making beyond the forms they already know how to reward.

12. Implications for Adult Basic Education and Literacy Education

The arguments explored throughout this article carry important implications for adult literacy policy, instruction, assessment, and research.

12.1. Policy and Assessment

Adult literacy policy in the USA and internationally frequently relies upon standardized assessments to define literacy proficiency and educational needs. Although these assessments can provide useful information regarding particular literacy performances, they should not be mistaken for comprehensive measures of adults' literate lives. Policy frameworks that rely exclusively on standardized assessment risk reducing literacy to narrowly measurable competencies while obscuring the relational, contextual, multilingual,

and multimodal literacies adults already practice (Cherewka & Prins, 2024). This is particularly important because adult literacy assessment often carries consequences beyond instruction itself. Assessment scores can shape placement decisions, funding allocation, public perceptions of literacy programs, assumptions regarding adult capability, and how adult learners see themselves.

Adults categorized as possessing “low literacy” may therefore experience forms of institutional reduction in which rich literacy practices become overshadowed by a single assessment category. More expansive approaches to assessment could include: portfolio-based demonstrations of language and literacy; multimodal composition opportunities; community-based literacy projects; collaborative literacy practices; oral and visual rhetorical forms; and assessments attentive to adults’ situated literacy practices, among others (Dooley, 2023). These alternative assessments do not require abandoning foundational literacy instruction or measurable skill development, but rather recognizing that literacy operates across broader social and communicative contexts than standardized assessment alone can capture.

12.2. Instruction, Professional Development, and Program Administration

Adult basic education and literacy educators occupy an important position within this tension because we must simultaneously support adults’ access to dominant literacies while recognizing the literacy resources they already possess, ones shaped through survival, adaptation, and meaning-making. Asset-based approaches begin from adults’ existing literacy practices while supporting access to dominant, institutionally recognized forms. This might include incorporating multimodal literacy practices; validating and honoring community and relational literacies; engaging multilingual and vernacular language practices; connecting literacy instruction to adults’ lived experiences; creating opportunities for collaborative meaning-making; and expanding what counts as demonstrating literacy competence. This approach aligns with Freirean traditions that position adult learners not as empty recipients, but as individuals already engaged in interpreting and navigating the world around them (Freire, 1985).

At the same time, literacy educators must consider the material realities that make dominant literacies consequential. Supporting adults’ access to standardized forms of reading and writing is necessary because institutions continue to reward those forms disproportionately. But placing the burden of adaptation—becoming legible—on adult learners leaves institutional literacy norms unquestioned. If adult literacy educators are committed to equity, then educational institutions, assessment structures, and literacy programs must expand their capacity to recognize broader forms of literacy practice, communication, and meaning-making. Thus, educators should not simply ask how adults can conform more closely to institutional literacy expectations but also how institutions might improve their ability to recognize and value the literacies adults already possess. The challenge is to resist treating institutionally sanctioned literacies as the only literacies that matter, the ones that matter most, or the only ones institutions recognize.

Adult literacy instruction can also invite learners to examine why, and under what circumstances, particular literacy practices become institutionally recognized while others remain invisible. Rather than treating dominant literacies as neutral or inevitable, educators can support learners in analyzing the historical, political, and institutional conditions through which certain forms of language, communication, and meaning-making are deemed “legitimate.” Such discussions position literacy learning not only as skill development but also as critical inquiry into the systems adults navigate and the translation labor those systems often require.

Program administrators and educators should critically examine the literacy assumptions embedded within curricular design, assessment practices, and institutional expect-

tations. For instance, they can ask: What forms of literacy are recognized as evidence of learning? Which literacy practices remain invisible? What linguistic and cultural norms structure institutional judgments regarding literacy? What forms of translation are learners required to perform in order for their literacy to count? How are programs perpetuating or challenging deficit-based understandings of learners? Professional development that engages literacy as social practice rather than solely a technical skill may help educators recognize broader forms of literacy competence that adults already possess.

12.3. Research

Finally, literacy researchers should continue expanding methodologies capable of recognizing and valuing the “extracurriculum” (Gere, 1994) of literacy practices outside of institutional settings. Research that honors relational, embodied, vernacular, and multimodal literacy practices can help surface forms of literacy that institutional systems frequently overlook or undervalue. This includes research examining literacy within families and communities; multilingual and transnational literacy practices; prison literacies; workplace and survival literacies; visual and multimodal meaning-making; and literacy practices shaped through migration, caregiving, and community participation.

At the same time, researchers must be cautious about romanticizing marginalization or framing exclusion from dominant literacies as liberatory. Documenting how adult educators can successfully navigate the “access paradox” (Janks, 2010)—that is, valuing the diverse literate capabilities that learners bring while also equipping them to master (and question) dominant literacies—would be invaluable. In sum, adult literacy scholarship must not only continue documenting adults’ everyday literacies, but also how systems determine which literacies become recognizable and valuable in the first place.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.J.; writing—original draft preparation, T.J.; writing—review and editing, E.P.; supervision, E.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding authors.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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