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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY: Preparing for lifelong literacy does not end with primary school, it is a continuing and complex responsibility



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Article Content:

The increasingly widespread use of AI, makes it clear that young students need to be trained to be not only consumers, but also creators of technology, writes Charu Malhotra

When literacy operates in the creative, gig and digital economy it must break free of traditional values. To be counted among the functionally literate, it may not suffice to limit one's ability to read and write and understand numbers, which are the normative standards of literacy. As we celebrate literacy day, let us recognise that to be functionally literate, intelligence and abilities need a more complex expression, where currencies of new-age literacy are creativity, content, communication and collaboration.

Digital literacy, media and cultural literacy, entrepreneurial and financial literacy, privacy, data protection and digital citizenship, design, visual and storytelling literacy, environmental literacy, civic literacy are some practically applied expressions of new-age literacy. Differently abled learners can find their individual expression of literacy without the labels of learning challenges. Further, anywhere, anytime situational literacy signals the ability to engage in learning, un-learning and re-learning the critical building blocks of adaptability, resilience or simply survive-ability. We are discussing lifelong literacy, preparation for which does not end with primary school. Making a people literate in a pluralist sense is a continuing and complex responsibility.

The future of work is changing as also the skills for the future; 65% of children entering primary school today will work in jobs that do not exist. Survey findings in Primus Partners' report 'Shaping Education to Nurture the \$80 billion Creative Economy' suggest that 1 in 5 students show low readiness in core skills needed in the creative and digital economies such as problem-solving, critical thinking and research; and only 9% of students show high readiness in critical 21st century skills.

Attributes of Digital Citizenship

Literacy in navigating information highways and new communication channels, being cybersecure, exhibiting ethical online behaviours are some mature attributes of digital citizenship. Research skills such as locating, fact checking, verifying, categorising and organising information are age-neutral skills. AI is a go-to tool and its increasingly widespread use, makes clear that young cohorts in schools and colleges need to be trained to be not only consumers of technology but also creators of technology for responsible, intelligent and informed use of not just AI and Machine Learning (ML), but other emerging technologies also such as IoT, blockchain, cybersecurity, big data analysis, augmented and virtual reality, 3D printing, metaverse etc.

Fluency, technical understanding and ease of use of new-age tools and skills—precision and automation tools, editing tools, digital and creative suite, green skills need formal, tutored and institutionally imparted skills. These cannot be left to an off chance relying on interest or personal initiative alone. Academic planning, provision and policy intersection are needed for universal and equitable adoption and practice, to avoid disparity and marginalisation of some segments of our learner population and workforce.

However, perquisites for this mixed bag of literacy are cognitive abilities—reasoning, logic, creative problem-solving, curiosity, critical inquiry and analytical thinking, as the bed rock of functional literacy in the present world order. Competency-based curriculum, pedagogy and assessment can help classrooms make the brave but practical shift away from rote learning and memorisation to preparing students for the real world of work and creative and digital economy. Processing written information, IPR consciousness, originality and authenticity is a sacrosanct toolkit for content creators, useful in evaluating content, developing an opinion, content creation and for informed or intuitive decision-making.

Today inclusive, tolerant and mutually respectful behaviours need socially literate skills to respect norms and interpret social cues for functionally rewarding personal and professional interpersonal relationships. Ability to collaborate is a necessary life skill to allow people to identify and access networks, as networks can do what individuals may find difficult to achieve on their own.

Socialisation of Education

Classrooms are not just infrastructural symbols of education – they provide the setting for socialisation of education. Modes of socialisation have changed as also of learning. How ready are we to break down old structures of cells and bells? Today students must learn as they socialise for sharper learning outcomes.

In a Blinkit/Google world – where information is at our fingertips and services at our doorstep, Bronfenbrenner's theory of interconnected environments assumes a virtual reality, with internet environments shaping social behaviours, beliefs, culture and learning. Social media creates awareness, identity and culture, but AI-generated filter bubbles, media noise, propaganda and disinformation can create an echo chamber and create confirmation bias and distort perceptions. Locating value and relevance in the noise to interpret symbols, messaging, cues responsibly and intelligently require a heightened literate sensibility.

But the bottom line is how do we make literacy count? Can employees start thinking like entrepreneurs –

responsible for their personal and institutional brand and profitability? Citizens need to own their life goals, monetise their worth and become productive and earning constituents of their country.