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Foregrounding Documentation within Metaliteracy

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Introduction: Documentation and Metaliteracy

Documentation plays a central role in metaliteracy. When individuals engage in metaliterate practices of creating, sharing, and assessing information, they are, in fact, engaging in practices with documents. Pioneered by Thomas P. Mackey and Trudi E. Jacobson, metaliteracy is an emerging field of research and practice exploring the intersections and interconnections between diverse literacies (see for example: Jacobson and Mackey 2013, 2016; Mackey and Jacobson 2011, 2014, 2016, 2019). Yet, while the goals and objectives of metaliteracy (metaliteracy.org) implicitly acknowledge documentation, they do not explicitly emphasize the fundamental roles played by it in helping facilitate and enable various metaliterate practices. This article aims to make these roles explicit.

By foregrounding documentation – specifically documents and their associated practices – within metaliteracy, this article argues for the recognition of the fundamental roles played by documents and their associated practices within metaliterate practices and learning. Drawing upon scholarship in documentation and metaliteracy studies, the aim is to help illuminate metaliteracy’s materiality by emphasizing its documentation, or put differently, metaliteracy is not about or dealing with intangible abstractions but instead dealing with tangible objects, namely, documents.

The following discussion is arranged into five main sections. The first section presents a brief overview of metaliteracy to provide a foundation on which to build the following sections. The second section makes specific connections between metaliteracy and documentation to help show how the latter materializes and makes possible the information and practices of the former. The third section introduces a documentary-material literacy framework to metaliteracy to demonstrate documentation’s fundamental roles within metaliteracy. The fourth section begins applying this framework to some of metaliteracy’s goals and objectives. The concluding section calls for greater attention to documentation within metaliteracy in addition to other kinds of information practices and literacies.

An Overview of Metaliteracy

This digital era requires understandings of diverse literacies, from traditional alphanumerical literacy to media and information literacies to computer and technical literacies, in order to navigate the virtual realm. Yet most current definitions of and approaches to these literacies, including information literacy, seem insufficient for the many radical and rapid changes occurring with and to information within an increasingly complex and dynamic information landscape. Many of these literacies – which are necessary for navigating and using information

generally and digital information, environments, and technologies specifically – appear disconnected from each other despite sharing many similar concerns and parallel perspectives.

The common ground shared by these diverse literacies is illuminated by metaliteracy. Specifically, metaliteracy connects their shared concerns and perspectives and, in so doing, begins redressing this insufficiency in definitions and approaches by presenting an overarching literacy for the digital age. According to Mackey and Jacobson, metaliteracy helps promote “critical thinking and collaboration in a digital age, providing a comprehensive framework to effectively participate in social media and online communities. It is a unified construct that supports the acquisition, production, and sharing of knowledge in collaborative online communities” (2011, 62). It synthesizes and unifies information and other seemingly disparate literacies into one framework in which to critically approach, analyze, and understand information. It further “challenges traditional skills-based approaches to information literacy by recognizing related literacy types and incorporating emerging technologies” (Mackey and Jacobson 2011, 62-63). It not only combines different literacies but further incorporates considerations and implications of new and emerging technologies in the shaping of metaliterate practices to help facilitate effective participation in social media and other online spaces.

The metaliteracy framework is constituted of four main goals, each of which comprises specific learning objectives. While the goals are specific, their associated objectives are conceived broadly to ensure scalability, reproducibility, and accessibility across different (information) contexts. It is worth noting metaliteracy’s four goals, which, along with particular objectives, will be further unpacked below (the full framework features in this article’s *Appendix 1: Metaliteracy’s Goals and Learning Objectives*). Metaliteracy’s goals aim to help develop so-called metaliterate learners by doing the following:

1. Actively evaluate content while also evaluating one’s own biases;
2. Engage with all intellectual property ethically and responsibly;
3. Produce and share information in collaborative and participatory environments; and
4. Develop learning strategies to meet lifelong personal and professional goals.

These goals recognize that individuals “must learn continually, given the constantly and rapidly evolving information landscape” (metaliteracy.org). This continuous learning involves acquiring “the ability to understand information using different forms of technology. They apply information knowledge gained from a wide range

of verbal, print, media, and online sources and continuously refine skills over time. This constitutes a practice of critical engagement with one's world as active and participatory learners" (Mackey and Jacobson 2011, 70). This critical engagement with the world as active and participatory learners ultimately involves a continuous process of learning how to learn, particularly about information in the increasingly complex and dynamic information landscape.

Critical engagement with the world often includes documentation. Learning how to learn, in fact, often means and necessitates learning about, how, and why to use various kinds of documents for diverse objectives and audiences in different settings. Mackey and Jacobson explain that metaliteracy is vital for this digital age "because it provides the higher order thinking required to engage with multiple document types through various media formats in collaborative environments" (2011, 70). This higher order thinking directly involves increasingly complex and dynamic documentation, or what Lyn Robinson (2015a, 2015b) terms as a new generation of documents that are multisensory, pervasive, and immersive. Metaliterate learners, in other words, invariably engage in practices with documents to address and realize their various information needs. Thus, when the importance of documentation to metaliteracy is foregrounded, metaliterate learners can further develop their learning on how to better access, assess, analyze, and otherwise use information.

Foregrounding Documentation in Metaliteracy

Developing active and engaged metaliterate learners therefore demands greater awareness of the documentation involved in information landscapes, especially in constantly evolving and ubiquitous technology-mediated environments. This greater awareness of documents, their many different forms and modalities, and the different kinds of practices required to engage with them, would help expand understanding, increase critical thinking, and refine capacities to navigate and participate in these environments. Metaliterate learners, in other words, must acquire abilities to understand diverse documentation that they need when dealing with information.

Different kinds of documents have different kinds of practices, purposes, audiences, effects, and contexts. Learning about documentation therefore means learning about these different kinds and when, how, and why to use them. Robinson, for instance, argues that new and emerging kinds of multisensory, pervasive, participatory, and immersive documentation is presenting new kinds of documents "to handle, of potentially wide scope and significance...[hence] it would be wise to begin to consider these issues now, so that [we] can be well-

prepared to deal with them, rather than struggling to catch up later, as has sometimes seemed to be the case with new digital formats” (2015a, 113). In the context of metaliteracy, becoming a metaliterate learner involves learning about and considering documentation’s diverse forms, formats, and functions in order to help interpret, evaluate, understand, and apply the information they materialize.

Greater awareness and understanding of documentation are particularly urgent in this so-called era of post-truth in which the authority, credibility, legitimacy, and trustworthiness of information – and therefore documentation – is blurred or blurring between real and fake. This corrosion of the truth is especially virulent in social media networks and other online communities where most documents, whether original or copy, authentic or tampered, real or fake, are (increasingly) indistinguishable. When documents remain largely unrecognized, or at best are only implicitly acknowledged, in favour of a more exclusive focus on information, then individuals are more likely to exercise less reflection on that information’s authenticity or veracity. Foregrounding documentation within metaliterate learning can help better prepare people to discern the degree of factuality and truthfulness of information.

An Overview of Documentary-Material Literacy

Proposed and developed by Marc Kosciejew (2017), a documentary-material literacy approach places documentation at the center of observation and study, thereby revealing how documentation is not incidental to, but instead is a fundamental part of, dealing with, and ultimately understanding, information. This approach specifically analyzes what makes an object a document and, in turn, how that document both materializes information and determines affordances and practices with that information.

This approach recognizes that not all documents do the same thing, share similar objectives, or possess the same power. There are different genres of documentation that feature different kinds of documents. For example, Kosciejew explains that, depending upon its genre, each different kind of document

“has a specific set of inscriptions, formats, or signals that help determine the role a document is meant to play...A document’s particular genre helps in its identification. Once its genre is properly identified, then a document’s roles emerge. The roles are further shaped by institutional disciplining methods of routinization and standardization that mandate, oblige, instruct”. (2017, 100)

Once a document is recognized and identified, its roles determined and understood, and its practices routinized, that information materializes and emerges. Thus, a

documentary-material literacy approach, embedded within the metaliteracy framework, would help to better inform and guide metaliterate practices because the ability to understand and use information requires the ability to understand and use different kinds of documents.

A documentary-material literacy involves situating “a specific document, or documents, at the center of observation, study, and analysis and thereby develops documentary dialogues about and for it, uses the document to better illuminate its context, and integrates the document in [approaches to] information” (Kosciejew 2017, 98). This approach is thus comprised of three components.

1. First, placing a document at the center of consideration helps draw attention to its specific kind, genre, intention, and focus that, in turn, enables specific discussion of the document and its degree of value for its context.
2. Second, using the document as a basis or point of departure for examining its wider context. This examination can involve diverse contextual aspects affecting, shaping, and involving the document and vice versa, including the wider material, technical, infrastructural, institutional, and sociocultural contexts in which the document emerges and is influenced by, and influences.
3. Third, integrating the document in approaches to information including in teaching, learning, and researching different kinds of information-related behaviours, practices, and literacies. This integration can be done when centering the document and using it to examine its wider context, which can, in turn, help shed light on its importance for the situation. The document is regarded not as unimportant for but instead as a vital part of information and its related considerations.

Taken together, these three components align with, and can consequently be embedded within, three goals of the metaliteracy framework; namely, first, to “actively evaluate content while also evaluating one’s own biases”; second, to “engage with all intellectual property ethically and responsibly”; and, third, to “produce and share information in collaborative and participatory environments” (metaliteracy.org). Let us now specifically apply these components to these goals.

Applying Documentary-Material Literacy to Metaliteracy

Although the metaliteracy framework does not explicitly recognize documentation’s importance, most of its goals implicitly gesture towards documents and their associated practices. The first goal of actively evaluating

content and one's own biases, for instance, involves determining "how a source's purpose, document type, and delivery mode affect its value for a particular situation" as well as critically assessing "information from all sources, including dynamic content that circulates online". This evaluation and assessment aligns with and involves the documentary-material literacy's first goal of placing a document or documents at the center of observation, study, and analysis. For instance, situating the documents of dynamic online content – such as its forms, formats, and functions – at the center of concern illuminates how the types and delivery modes of this information materialize, shape, and impact the information and various literacies associated with it.

As Mackey and Jacobson explain, individuals become metaliterate when they "need to be able to recognize information for what it is, and be able to synthesize disparate information formats to effectively meet their needs" (2014, 87). This recognition and synthesis are especially important when dealing with dynamic online content that is multisensory, participatory, and pervasive. When individuals recognize the documentation of this information, they are better able to synthesize disparate documentary forms, formats, and functions to effectively address their information needs. They would be better able to determine if their information needs require, for instance, certain technologies, platforms, or services; multiplatform and/or multidevice interactivity and interoperability; or diverse kinds of documents such as textual, audio, visual, photographic, pictorial, etc.

Further, actively evaluating content necessitates examining the document's wider context to help determine how it materializes information and, in so doing, affects and impacts that context. Examining its wider context can involve looking at the material, technical, infrastructural, institutional, and sociocultural circumstances that directly determine the document's status as authoritative, authentic, and legitimate as well as its value and the ways in which it is used. This examination can critically ask, for example, if the document is created or shared by known, reputable, or trustworthy sources; when was it created; from where does it originate; for whom is it intended and where is it meant to circulate; and what are the circumstances bearing upon the document, not to mention what circumstances does the document (aim to) bear upon?

The second metaliteracy goal of ethically and responsibly engaging with intellectual property similarly only implicitly recognizes documentation yet nevertheless necessarily involves documentation. It helps "prepare learners to be active creators and distributors of information...[and to differentiate] between the production of original information and remixing or re-purposing open resources" (Mackey and Jacobson 2014, 88). Metaliterate learners need to be able to

differentiate between producing original information and remixing openly licensed content, responsibly producing and sharing “original information and ethically remix[ing] and repurpose[ing] openly licensed content,” distinguishing “between public and personal information and mak[ing] ethical and informed decisions about appropriately sharing information online,” and differentiating “between copyright, Creative Commons, and open licenses in both the creation and licensing of original and repurposed content”. Engaging with intellectual property, in other words, means engaging with documentation. It aligns with and involves the three components of the documentary-material literacy because it aims to better understand the kinds of documents that are produced, interpreted, and used in approaches to intellectual property and wider legal contexts.

The third metaliteracy goal aims for metaliterate learners to develop abilities to produce and share information in collaborative and participatory environments. Its objectives are closely connected to documentation, such as the sharing of “knowledge accurately and effectively through the production of content using appropriate and evolving formats and platforms”; translating “information presented in one manner to another in order to best meet the needs of a particular audience”; evaluating and verifying “user-generated content and appropriately apply[ing] in new knowledge creation”; and recognizing “diverse cultural values and norms to create and share information for global audiences”. This third goal thus aligns with and involves the documentary-material literacy’s three components. It requires making the document the center of observation, examining its wider context, and integrating it into the teaching, learning, and research associated with achieving this goal’s objectives.

Thus, applying a documentary-material literacy involves the metaliterate learner placing a document at the center of observation, study, and analysis; using the document to analyze its wider context; and integrating the document in teaching, learning, and researching practices and literacies. It also aligns with three metaliteracy goals and their objectives, namely, actively evaluating content while also critically evaluating one’s biases, engaging with intellectual property ethically and responsibly, and producing and sharing information in collaborative and participatory information environments. It ultimately helps prepare metaliterate learners to improve their understanding of the materiality of information they are creating, engaging with, and using.

Conclusion: Establishing a Documentary-Material Metaliteracy

Accessing, assessing, analyzing, and using information often means accessing, assessing, analyzing, and using documents. It is with and through documents and their associated practices that information is materialized into objects that are

tangible and that can consequently be consulted, read, viewed, managed, engaged with, shared, and used in and for a multitude of purposes. The diverse information landscape, in other words, is largely constituted by and through documentation. Moreover, as the information landscape becomes increasingly complex and dynamic with new and emerging kinds of multisensory, participatory, and pervasive documentation to produce, share, and use information, the need for metaliteracy concurrently grows in importance to help individuals approach this exciting, overwhelming, and constantly expanding environment.

This article argued that the metaliteracy framework would be strengthened by emphasizing the important roles played by documentation that are necessary for many metaliterate practices and considerations. When incorporated within metaliteracy, a documentary-material literacy helps expand awareness and enrich understanding of information. The metaliterate learner is indeed an “engaged and active researcher capable of differentiating among a multitude of document types and modalities” (Mackey and Jacobson 2014, 92). Ultimately, the metaliterate learner is dealing with diverse kinds of documentation in various information-related activities and practices. This expanded awareness and enriched understanding of information, facilitated by examining its documentation, can further help address some of the corrosive effects of fake news and post-truth that seem to be undermining trust in contemporary society. Indeed, it can further assist metaliterate learners in determining whether information is fake, illegitimate, and untruthful or real, legitimate, and truthful.

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Appendix 1: Metaliteracy's Goals and Learning Objectives (<https://metaliteracy.org/learning-objectives/>)

There are four goals for metaliterate learners, each of which includes a number of learning objectives. While some of the metaliteracy goals echo long-valued information literacy principles, others are new, reflecting today's evolving information environment. Most of the specific learning objectives range much further afield from traditional information literacy, providing outcomes that could be applied in a range of educational settings.

Metaliteracy learning falls into four domains: **behavioral** (what students should be able to do upon successful completion of learning activities—skills, competencies), **cognitive** (what students should know upon successful completion of learning activities—comprehension, organization, application, evaluation), **affective** (changes in learners' emotions or attitudes through engagement with learning activities), and **metacognitive** (what learners think about their own thinking—a reflective understanding of how and why they learn, what they do and do not know, their preconceptions, and how to continue to learn). Each learning objective below fits into one or more of these categories, and is labeled as such (**B** for behavioral, **C** for cognitive, **A** for affective, **M** for metacognitive).

These learning objectives recognize that metaliterate “learners,” as they are called here, must learn continually, given the constantly and rapidly evolving information landscape. Instructors and learners can meet these objectives in a variety of ways, depending on the learning context, choosing from a menu of learning activities. The objectives are conceived broadly, so as to remain scalable, reproducible, and accessible in a range of contexts.

Goal 1: Actively evaluate content while also evaluating one's own biases

1. Verify expertise but acknowledge that experts do exist. (A, C)
2. Acknowledge that content is not always produced for legitimate reasons, and that biases exist, both subtle and overt. (C)
3. Reflect on how you feel about information or an information environment to consider multiple perspectives. (A, M)
4. Consciously seek information from a spectrum of viewpoints and sources. (B)
5. Determine how a source's purpose, document type, and delivery mode affect its value for a particular situation. (B, C)
6. Distinguish between editorial commentary and a research-based perspective, recognizing that values and beliefs are embedded in all information. (C)
7. Determine the value of formal and informal information from diverse online sources, such as scholarly, user-generated, and OERs. (C)
8. Evaluate user-generated information in social media environments and differentiate between opinion and fact.(B, C)

9. Critically assess information from all sources, including dynamic content that circulates online. (B)
10. Examine how you feel about the information presented and how this impacts your response. (A, M)

Goal 2: Engage with all intellectual property ethically and responsibly

1. Differentiate between producing original information and remixing openly licensed content. (C)
2. Responsibly produce and share original information and ethically remix and repurpose openly licensed content. (B)
3. Distinguish between public and personal information and make ethical and informed decisions about appropriately sharing information online. (C)
4. Differentiate between copyright, Creative Commons, and open licenses in both the creation and licensing of original and repurposed content. (B, C)
5. Identify and follow the specific intellectual property attribution expectations in the setting in which you are working. (B, C)

Goal 3: Produce and share information in collaborative and participatory environments

1. See oneself as a producer as well as consumer of information. (A, M)
2. Participate conscientiously and ethically in collaborative environments. (B)
3. Protect personal privacy and actively secure your online information. (B, C)
4. Share knowledge accurately and effectively through the production of content using appropriate and evolving formats and platforms. (B)
5. Translate information presented in one manner to another in order to best meet the needs of a particular audience. (B, C)
6. Recognize that learners are also teachers and teach what you know or learn in collaborative settings. (A, B, C)
7. Critically evaluate and verify user-generated content and appropriately apply in new knowledge creation. (B, C)
8. Recognize diverse cultural values and norms to create and share information for global audiences. (B, C)

Goal 4: Develop learning strategies to meet lifelong personal and professional goals

1. Recognize that learning is a process and that reflecting on errors or mistakes leads to new insights and discoveries. (M)
2. Assess learning to determine both the knowledge gained and the gaps in understanding. (C, M)

3. Recognize that critical thinking depends upon knowledge of a subject and actively pursue deeper understanding through inquiry and research. (A, B, C, M)
4. Value persistence, adaptability, and flexibility in lifelong learning. (M)
5. Adapt to new learning situations while being flexible about the varied approaches to learning. (A, B)
6. Adapt to and understand new technologies and the impact they have on learning. (A, B)
7. Effectively communicate and collaborate in shared spaces to learn from multiple perspectives. (B, C)
8. Engage in informed, self-directed learning that encourages a broader worldview through the global reach of today's social media environment. (B, M)
9. Apply metaliterate learning as a lifelong value and practice. (M)