

How can health literacy professionals enact their commitment to equity in this moment? Insights from critical theories of literacy

Anne Marie Liebel Ed.D.



HEALTH
COMMUNICATION
PARTNERS

Results

Introduction

Health literacy professionals have posed pointed questions on social media, in professional forums, and in private conversations about:

- Issues of bias and discrimination across the health sector, including within the health literacy field.
- What a commitment to equity implies for the research and practice of health literacy.
- How they as individuals, and the field of health literacy overall, may take action in this moment to help reduce health disparities.




Health literacy practitioners and researchers often connect health literacy to issues of health equity and social justice. This requires looking inward at the field of health literacy itself to identify and transform any inequitable and unjust structures and practices.

One approach to this work is the *critical examination of terminology, phrases, disciplinary discourses, and practices* in the health literacy field for the assumptions beneath them.

Terms, phrases, discourses and practices can hide assumptions about individuals or groups that are in conflict with goals of equity and justice.

Background

Critical theories of literacy:

- “ ” Challenge dominant ideologies and seek to disrupt hierarchies through examination of words, phrases, texts, discourses and practices
-  Focus on the complex relationships between written and oral language, culture, and power
-  Pay special attention to the experiences of marginalized populations
-  Have been applied for decades in adult learning and development contexts (Liebel, in press)

Summary of Findings

- ✓ Terms, phrases, discourses and practices related to health literacy are seen not as objective or neutral but as ideologically situated
- ✓ Terms, phrases and disciplinary discourses related to health literacy shape how people and problems are perceived and approached
- ✓ Some terms, phrases, and discourses reflect a deficit view of individuals and groups (Liebel, in press)
- ✓ Critical theories of literacy provide tools to expose often-hidden assumptions beneath terms, phrases, discourses and practices in health literacy

Apply critical theories of literacy to health literacy in order to:

- **Encourage question-posing** about assumptions beneath words, phrases, discourses and practices
- **Evaluate disciplinary norms** in light of the values, resources and practices of individuals and communities different from the health professionals'
- **Identify and remove obstacles** to equity and justice that emerge through disciplinary discourses, whether in research, practice, or policy.

Conclusions

- Words, phrases, discourses and practices in the health literacy field can no longer be seen as “neutral” or “common sense” but as ideologically situated
- **Any equity-oriented approach to health literacy research and practice requires that terminology, discourses, and practices also are grounded in equity and justice.**