Do you remember what the pages of a book looked like before you could read? We remember they seemed impenetrable and garbled. Learning to read is learning to make sense out of that obscure collection of markings. Now, imagine trying to make sense of a complex graph plotting years of data across a range of economic variables. Perhaps such a graph would give you pause even today—as it likely would your students. But, with purposeful practice, they can become as fluent in decoding and extracting meaning from this system of communication as they are with text.

The term literacy, which we traditionally use to describe the ability to read and write text, is proliferating across library and other educational literature. Concerns about financial literacy, digital literacy, and civic literacy help shape the programming offered by our colleagues in public libraries. It can be dizzying to consider the array of literacies and try to understand how they fit productively into our own school library programs. To tease out the underlying commonalities of all these literacies and begin to integrate them into a meaningful whole, we wanted to investigate: What makes a literacy?

Ultimately, each type of literacy facilitates sense-making within a certain field. Sense-making, the process we use to construct understanding, includes developing enough background knowledge to interpret and make judgments; it allows us to notice patterns and discrepancies, so we can make connections among diverse ideas. New literacies enter the lexicon as we recognize our students are struggling with sense-making in new contexts.

Perhaps we agree that these emerging skill sets are important, but you may still be asking: Is it the role of the school librarian to take on these challenges? School librarians’ traditional practice includes supporting literacy development throughout the educational process and teaching research and information skills. This issue will demonstrate that this expertise uniquely positions us to support students in honing skills in other literacies.

Priscille Dando opens our discussion, laying out the basic skills we can build into early literacy instruction through interactive read-alouds. She highlights particular elements that will serve our students as they develop a range of literacies: self-monitoring for comprehension, connecting to prior knowledge, asking and answering challenging questions. The kinds of questions the school librarian asks as she guides young readers to think and connect with a story provide a model for sense-making across multiple literacies.

Increasingly, we notice that the ability to ask good questions is a significant concern among our school library colleagues. Sara Kelley-Mudie and Jeanie Phillips present for your consideration the literacy of questioning and strategies for helping students learn to generate effective questions. They contend that capable
questioning isn’t about knowing the answer, but about knowing how to approach the question and developing a sense of what a right answer would look like.

Source quality, privacy, and information ethics are also deeply held concerns of our profession, but how do we equip students in these areas as we teach them to use data as evidence? Kristin Fontichiaro and Jo Angela Oehrli help librarians break down the concept of data literacy into manageable pieces, laying out the areas where our professional expertise sets librarians up to have a positive impact on student outcomes.

As school librarians, we help students evaluate content in various formats. Students work with visual materials as both content consumers and content creators. Karyn N. Silverman and Joy Piedmont share concrete examples from their visual literacy curriculum, showing how they build a foundation in constructing visual presentations, helping students develop skills that they apply to school work across disciplines.

Nora Murphy puts her finger on a particular challenge that often stymies student researchers. Their limited exposure to the sheer variety of information sources constitutes a kind of source illiteracy. She argues that before students can evaluate content for quality and appropriateness to their information needs, they must first understand the nature of the source itself. Nora identifies ways we can foster development of source literacy in our students. Her metaphorical frame of “frog literacy” provides a fresh perspective on student research.

Can building a better understanding of the lexicon, concepts, and values of the disciplines help school librarians gain leverage with content-area teachers and inspire collaboration? Meredith Cranston, Sue Smith, and Lauri Vaughan take on the challenging but rewarding task of examining the overlap between information literacies and the disciplinary literacies that guide much of teachers’ practice in the classroom. The authors propose that disciplinary literacies provide librarians with an avenue to better integrate our school library programs with classroom instruction while helping students navigate the potentially conflicting expectations of multiple disciplines.

This issue also features articles addressing related topics. “Technolibrarian” Carolyn Foote considers how school librarians can reduce students’ “library anxiety” and foster the digital literacies needed for college and workforce readiness. Elementary librarian Mary Catherine Coleman explores an innovative application of Design Thinking practices in early literacy instruction. Her approach could be viewed as a creative application of the techniques Pricille Dando advocates for earlier in the issue.

In this issue’s online exclusive article, Katie Day, head of libraries at United World College of South East Asia—East Campus in Singapore, uses the perspective of her position to raise the question of global literacy. What knowledge, mindsets, and skills does it take to be a global citizen?

But with all these literacies (and more!) potentially falling under the school librarian’s purview, how is a school librarian to get anything done? Annie Schutte wraps up our discussion of literacies, leading us through a process for examining our own programs, prioritizing objectives, and working with classroom teachers to craft a coherent curricular arc.

As partners in support of research instruction, we have long highlighted the necessity of critical thinking. We push students to frame better questions, investigate the source of information, and synthesize information from multiple sources to, ultimately, form a judgment and communicate their conclusions. These habits of mind will serve students well as they strive to become data-conversant, globally minded, and digitally savvy. What is a literacy? It is at the core of what school librarians do.

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