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Ontology of Literacy in the Workplace: A Phenomenological Perspective

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Abstract. This study explores the ontological essence of workplace literacy through a phenomenological lens, addressing the evolving demands of modern professional environments that require advanced competencies in literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. Grounded in the recognition that contemporary workplaces are increasingly complex and text-mediated, this research investigates how reading, writing, and communication practices are enacted, experienced, and interpreted by employees across various sectors in Indonesia. Employing transcendental phenomenology as the methodological framework, the study systematically analyzes both the textural descriptions and structural essences of informants' lived experiences from diverse workplace settings. This dual analysis reveals that literacy exists and manifests within professional contexts as more than just a technical skill. The findings demonstrate that workplace literacy operates simultaneously as a functional competency and as a form of professional consciousness that mediates relationships among individuals, texts, and organizational systems. Literacy emerges as essential for maintaining work consistency, enabling critical self-reflection, and bridging personal values with organizational culture. Furthermore, the study reveals that authentic workplace literacy is deeply rooted in reflective awareness and humanistic values, rather than being confined to instrumental or procedural applications. These insights underscore the necessity of cultivating workplace literacy development programs that prioritize reflexive practice, critical consciousness, and the integration of human-centered values within organizational learning frameworks, ultimately contributing to more meaningful and effective professional communication practices.

Keywords: Workplace Literacy; Phenomenology, Ontology

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INTRODUCTION

The workplace is a realm of life impacted by rapidly changing global dynamics. Digitalization and the pandemic have altered industry dynamics and work patterns indirectly through changes in market behavior, and directly through the behavior of managers and workers. These behavioral changes logically also impact the skill requirements of workers and their development. Furthermore, as a response to rapid and massive global changes, researchers have introduced and adopted the term "21st Century Skills."

The concept of 21st Century Skills emerged through ideas that identify life skills as: (1) skills for learning and innovation, (2) digital literacy skills, and (3) life and career skills (Trilling & Fadil, 2009). These 21st Century Skills, which form the framework of Partnership 21 (P21), are further elaborated as the ability to think critically and solve problems, communicate and collaborate, creativity and innovation, information literacy, media literacy, information and communication technology literacy, flexibility and adaptability, initiative and self-direction, social

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skills and cross-cultural interaction, productivity and accountability, as well as leadership and responsibility.

In 2023, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducted a global assessment through the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) framework, which aimed to evaluate and analyze adult skills across countries—specifically 29 member countries and 2 non-members (OECD, 2024)—representing 673 million people from the population. This program took the form of a survey assessing key skills in information processing, including literacy, numeracy, and technology-rich problem solving.

The PIAAC 2023 results showed that the majority of the adult population achieved only 26% in literacy, 25% in numeracy, and 29% in adaptive problem solving, which impacts their economic and social conditions (OECD, 2024). Although Indonesia did not participate in PIAAC 2023, the results generally illustrate how foundational adult skills (literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills) face significant gaps and require attention. The World Economic Forum (WEF), through its Future of Jobs Report 2025, outlined that the most needed skills in the workplace are analytical abilities, which are considered essential by 7 out of 10 employers. The next important skills to possess are resilience, flexibility and agility, leadership and social influence skills, adaptability and collaboration abilities, as well as cognitive skills, creative thinking, interpersonal skills (including self-awareness and motivation), and problem-solving abilities (WEF, 2025).

In the Indonesian context, changes in workplace skill requirements have also occurred as a result of Industrial Revolution 4.0, where prioritized work skills include critical thinking and active learning abilities, written and oral communication, numeracy skills for problem solving—including complex problems, resource management skills, social skills, evaluation abilities—assessment and decision-making, technical skills in technology-based work systems, as well as digital/information and communication technology skills (Jaganathan and Geronimo, 2021). At the same time, it has been found that some workers demonstrate inadequate skill mastery, potentially eliminating up to 29% of job positions, losing 14% of working time in the food and beverage industry, with up to 4% of employers preferring to recruit new people rather than train existing workers. In fact, 60% of employers prefer to employ freelance workers, which means opportunities for workers' economic welfare are declining (Jaganathan and Geronimo, 2021).

The development of the literacy movement in Indonesia also shows that literacy practices cannot be separated from social dynamics and educational policies that change over time,

creating a need to view literacy not only as a basic skill but as a cultural phenomenon that continues to evolve (Ahmadi & Yulianto, 2017).

From several previous studies, it is evident that comprehensively, life skills in the context of industry and the workplace are manifestations of and/or related to literacy skills. Literacy skills refer to an individual's ability to process information and knowledge for life skills (KBBI, 2025). Therefore, studies on literacy as life skills, including in the workplace (workplace literacy), need to be conducted to strengthen both conceptually and practically.

Despite the recognition of workplace literacy's importance, existing research has predominantly focused on measuring literacy competencies through quantitative assessments or analyzing literacy from organizational effectiveness perspectives. What remains underexplored is the fundamental nature and essence of workplace literacy itself—how it is experienced, understood, and constructed by workers in their daily professional lives. This gap is particularly significant given that workplace literacy, unlike academic literacy, is deeply embedded in specific organizational contexts, work cultures, and professional identities. Furthermore, while international frameworks like P21 and PIAAC provide skill taxonomies, they do not address the ontological foundation of what workplace literacy fundamentally is as a lived phenomenon.

The novelty of this research lies in its philosophical approach to workplace literacy through phenomenological ontology, which moves beyond conventional skill-based or competency-based frameworks. By investigating the essence and being of workplace literacy as experienced by workers themselves, this study offers a foundational understanding that transcends contextual variations and technological changes. This ontological inquiry provides a unique contribution by establishing the philosophical groundwork for workplace literacy as a distinct phenomenon, differentiated from both academic literacy and general life skills. Such a perspective is essential for developing more holistic and sustainable approaches to workforce development that recognize literacy not merely as a set of measurable competencies, but as a fundamental aspect of professional existence and identity.

The limited research on workplace literacy from this ontological perspective forms the foundation for this study to be conducted with the aim of understanding the reality or essence and definition of workplace literacy. The effort to explore this essence and definition is carried out through an ontological study as a philosophical inquiry of knowledge. This research is intended to provide benefits in the form of contributions that enrich workplace literacy studies, both theoretically/conceptually and practically. As enrichment material, this research can serve as a foundation for further research to explore the subject of discussion more deeply and/or more

broadly. Practically, the results of this study can serve as a foundation for curriculum development and/or design of worker capacity building in industry.

METHODS

This research employs a qualitative approach aimed at exploring the meaning of individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), particularly in the context of workplace experiences. This design aims to obtain an understanding of the meanings from several participants or informants within a social context. This research develops textural descriptions, which depict what is experienced by informants, as well as structural descriptions, which describe how conditions, situations, or contexts of experiences are navigated by informants (Moustakas, 1994); both of which fulfill the requirements of ontological description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This research uses interviews as the data collection instrument, employing guided interviews structured with open-ended questions in a one-on-one interview design conducted online (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018) through the Zoom platform.

Interviews were conducted with 5 (five) individuals from diverse workplace backgrounds, where each person shared their literacy experiences in their respective workplaces. The research applies an epoche process regarding the phenomenon being explored, with the aim of ensuring that data collection remains open and free from preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994). All data obtained through interviews were processed and analyzed in stages, starting from coding, theme organization, data representation, and the development of interpretations from the data and representation to produce quality interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Ahmadi, 2019). Data validity was maintained through cross-theme verification processes and repeated reflection to ensure consistency of meaning among informants, while ethical considerations were fulfilled by obtaining informed consent from each participant before interviews were conducted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cross-informant findings reveal that workplace literacy emerges as a practice integrated with organizational activity dynamics and culture within professional contexts. Each informant demonstrated how reading, writing, and communicating become part of work mechanisms, reporting systems, and cross-functional interactions. In the mining and energy sectors, literacy manifests in procedural documentation and technical communication requiring precision and compliance.

Meanwhile, in financial services and manufacturing, literacy emerges through digital instructions, performance reporting, and data-based verification processes. These practices

collectively show that literacy functions as both a work tool and a space of meaning, where workers negotiate understanding, responsibilities, and professional values.

The textural dimension of the data reveals complex literacy experiences, ranging from reading instructions, writing reports, editing digital messages, to reflecting on work outcomes. These experiences demonstrate a balance between cognitive and social dimensions, where every literacy action is contextualized by organizational norms and work relationships. Meanwhile, the structural dimension reveals strong connections between systems, policies, and technology use. The use of digital platforms, enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, or online documents creates new layers in literacy practices: speed, traceability, and virtual collaboration. At this stage, literacy practices are shaped by systems while simultaneously configuring systems through human interpretation and action.

Ontologically, the overall results show that literacy is inherent to human existence and role as knowledgeable and empowered subjects. Reading and writing actions transform into processes of thinking, relating, and adapting to work dynamics. Each informant demonstrated awareness of literacy's function as a means to understand oneself, navigate systems, and strengthen professional contributions. Thus, literacy constitutes both a functional skill and a reflective practice that links individual experience with the social and technological structures present in the workplace. This synthesis reinforces literacy's position as an integral part of work meaningfulness and professional identity formation in the modern context.

Based on the general understanding of cross-informant findings, a need emerges to examine more deeply how literacy experiences are actually lived by individuals in the workplace. The following section elaborates the textural dimension in the form of literacy experiences representing the direct experiential forms of workers in conducting daily literacy practices in their work environments.

Literacy Experience in the Workplace

Informants' literacy experiences demonstrate that reading, writing, and communicating at work occur as a series of activities embedded in production, reporting, and coordination processes. Each sector presents different experiential textures, though following the same principle: literacy functions to understand, interpret, and follow up on information within the context of professional responsibilities.

In the mining context, reading safety procedures and inspection reports becomes a routine that is not only technical but also reflective, as workers connect it with risk and work ethics. In the

energy field, writing daily operational notes and inter-division communication shows literacy as a practice of maintaining system continuity and data accuracy.

In financial services, texts produced and read are highly standardized, such as digital forms, performance reports, and risk analysis memos. Nevertheless, informants describe interpretive space in interpreting data and formulating decisions. This forms a literacy experience that is both technical and dialogical. In manufacturing, workers face visual instructions, production tables, and work output reports requiring the ability to read symbols, numbers, and patterns simultaneously. This activity cultivates awareness that literacy is a practice of reading words, work systems, and production logic flows. Meanwhile, in the nonprofit sector, literacy emerges through program report preparation, social achievement narratives, and cross-stakeholder communication, demanding sensitivity to social context and beneficial purposes.

The overall textural experiences show that literacy is multimodal, combining text, data, images, and symbols in an integrated thinking process. Informants describe how reading and writing become means to build work order, anticipate errors, and negotiate meaning across roles. These experiences generate reflective awareness that literacy practices serve to maintain system sustainability while creating personal space for learning and self-improvement. This pattern reveals literacy dynamics that are not static but move between cognitive and social, between instruction and improvisation.

Thus, the textural dimension reveals the essence of literacy practice as an experience that is directly lived, repeated, and meaningful. Beyond communication or administrative functions, literacy also becomes part of the process of understanding work reality, managing responsibilities, and making sense of action outcomes. Through literacy activities, workers develop their professional identities, build ownership of tasks, and connect personal values with organizational goals.

These textural experiences do not stand alone but occur within complex and regulated work systems. The following discussion reviews the structural dimension, namely regarding the context of literacy by describing the social, organizational, and technological scope in which literacy practices occur and shape interactions between humans and systems.

Context of Literacy in the Workplace

Work structures in each location form different literacy ecosystems, yet all affirm the interconnection between organizational systems, technology, and communication culture. In mining and energy, literacy is embedded in safety systems, logistics, and production supervision. Texts, reports, and instructions function as control documents to ensure procedural consistency

while serving as authoritative references for operational decisions. In this context, workers read instructions, interpret technical regulations, and apply them in changing field conditions. In financial services and manufacturing, the structural context is shaped by digital governance. Enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems, automated spreadsheets, and performance dashboards make literacy data-driven and evidence-based. Reading and writing practices shift from physical documents to screens, demanding speed, accuracy, and the ability to trace information trails.

Meanwhile, in nonprofits, the literacy context is rooted in participatory work structures. Program documents, donor reports, and public correspondence become spaces for negotiating meaning between social values, sustainability, and accountability. In the latter three settings, hierarchical organizational structures blend with collaborative culture, creating literacy systems that are simultaneously formal and adaptive.

Structural analysis reveals four main layers of interconnection: organizational structure determining literacy direction and responsibilities, communication flows across roles and units, technology-based work systems expanding information access and distribution, and administrative-behavioral habits embedding reporting, verification, and evaluation. These four create a context where literacy becomes an instrument of management, supervision, and learning.

Overall, the structural dimension shows that literacy does not stand alone but is integrated into mutually supporting systems of policies, infrastructure, and work behaviors. Literacy serves as a link between individuals and work systems, enabling the translation of organizational goals into daily actions. In this context, literacy ability becomes an indicator of adaptive readiness—the way someone navigates texts, data, and instructions within complex and automated work networks. The results of structural mapping show the interconnection between individual experience and systemic order. To elaborate the meaning of this relationship, an ontological synthesis is needed that links the experiential (textural) and systemic (structural) dimensions. The following section presents the thematic synthesis, namely the ontology of workplace literacy itself, which elaborates how literacy is understood as a way of being—that is, the expression of human existence in the work context.

Ontology of Workplace Literacy

Cross-informant analysis shows that literacy functions dually, as a functional skill and as a manifestation of professional existence. Each individual interprets reading, writing, and

communicating practices as part of the process of becoming a knowledgeable working human being.

In mining and energy contexts, awareness of risk and responsibility shapes literacy as a process of caution and precision. The act of reading safety reports or writing field notes becomes a means of reflection on life values, beyond administrative tasks. In financial services and manufacturing, literacy is interpreted as a way to maintain credibility, accuracy, and work system reliability. In nonprofits, literacy becomes a way to understand the meaning of social contribution, connecting words with impact.

From the perspective of awareness and knowledge processing, all informants demonstrated awareness that literacy serves as a bridge between personal experience and collective knowledge. Workers read to understand instructions and also to affirm their existential position within the work system becoming part of the shared knowledge flow. At the agency level, informants demonstrated the ability to self-direct, make decisions, and reinterpret organizational texts according to situational needs. Literacy becomes an arena of action, not merely compliance with format. In the context of adaptability, literacy helps workers navigate changes, both technological and procedural.

Reading and writing experiences transform into survival and development strategies. Informants described the ability to move between digital media, formal documents, and interpersonal communication as a form of literacy flexibility that grows with work dynamics. In the dimension of reflectivity, literacy exists as a space to reassess one's role and self-worth. Through report preparation, data editing, and policy interpretation, workers find meaning in work as part of their professional identity, constituting a form of reflection on the relationship between humans, texts, and systems. The integration of these five dimensions forms the ontology of literacy as a unified whole: humans, texts, and systems mutually affirm each other in cycles of awareness, action, and learning. Literacy becomes the way humans understand their existence in the workplace, not just what is done, but how that existence is lived and made meaningful. Thus, literacy becomes an existential practice that links knowledge, responsibility, and self-worth in a constantly changing social-professional space.

Implications

From this ontological synthesis, a number of important theoretical and practical consequences can be identified for literacy development in the workplace. This section interprets findings in the context of individual development, organizational strengthening, and the formation of sustainable and knowledgeable work systems. Cross-dimensional findings indicate that literacy

has direct implications for how individuals, organizations, and systems interact in building productivity and work meaning. First, from the individual perspective, literacy functions as a tool of professional awareness that sharpens sensitivity to responsibility, accuracy, and work ethics. Workers accustomed to reflective reading and systematic writing tend to have higher awareness of the consequences of their actions. Literacy practice becomes a vehicle for self-directed learning and critical thinking capacity development amid complex work dynamics. Second, at the organizational level, literacy becomes the foundation of transparent, accountable, and collaborative governance. Structural findings show that texts, data, and communication serve as coordination instruments across levels, strengthening information flow and minimizing systemic error risks. Organizations that strategically arrange literacy through open-access documentation models, digital reporting training, and reflection forums can build adaptive and innovative work cultures. This confirms that literacy serves not only as an administrative skill but also as an element of organizational culture, determining knowledge system sustainability. Third, from the work system and policy perspective, literacy serves as a connector between humans and technology. Analysis results show that workers who understand how to read digital systems, write data consistently, and communicate through online platforms can navigate industry changes more stably. This implication is important for organizations undergoing digital transformation, as successful technology adoption is determined by digital competence accompanied by actors' reflective abilities. In this context, literacy becomes both a transition tool and part of the socio-technological sustainability mechanism.

Finally, at the conceptual level, this research enriches the understanding of literacy as an existential practice. Literacy is a medium for working and also becomes a means for humans to understand themselves in work. Awareness, agency, and reflectivity found in informants' experiences show that literacy has an ontological dimension, it becomes the way humans "become" in the workplace. This implication confirms the need for education and work training approaches that, beyond focusing on technical skills, must also address awareness of the meaning and value of every literacy action.

CONCLUSSION

The results of this research strengthen the position of literacy as the core of both professional and social consciousness in modern life. As a conclusion, this section summarizes the essence of research findings and the conceptual direction generated for literacy development in the future. This research was conducted to explain the nature of literacy within a phenomenological-ontological framework. The study results show that literacy is a living practice

integrated with the dynamics of modern work systems; a manifestation of individual professional and social consciousness within organizations. Through phenomenological reduction and alignment of textural and structural dimensions, it is evident that literacy is not merely reading or writing skills, but rather a cognitive, social, and reflective activity that connects humans, texts, and work systems. Texturally, literacy emerges as direct experience lived through work routines: reading instructions, writing reports, verifying data, and communicating within professional networks. This experience demonstrates that literacy functions as a means of understanding work reality and ensuring consistency in the value of responsibility.

Structurally, literacy is constructed by policies, technological systems, and organizational culture that demand accuracy, transparency, and collaboration. Through interactions between individuals and systems, literacy becomes a connecting medium between formal rules and adaptive practices. Ontological synthesis reveals that literacy is an expression of human existence as conscious and knowledgeable subjects. Every literacy act represents a process of self-understanding, adapting to change, and constructing meaning from work experience.

Overall, workplace literacy is understood as a reflective practice that integrates consciousness, knowledge processing, agency, adaptability, and reflexivity within work or professional contexts. Theoretically, this research enriches adult literacy studies by positioning literacy as a multidimensional consciousness phenomenon, encompassing cognitive, social, and existential aspects. Practically, these findings affirm the importance of developing literacy programs oriented toward meaning-consciousness, ethics, and reflection; not only toward mastering technical skills. The findings of this research provide both a conceptual foundation and empirical evidence for strengthening training policies, curricula, and strategies for capacity building among Indonesian workers in facing increasingly digital and knowledge-based workplace transformations.

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