1 Introduction

Food literacy for contemporary food and eating

Helen Vidgen

Globally, the food system, and the relationship of the individual to that system, continues to change and grow in complexity. Food is a basic human need in that it is essential for healthy growth and development. It has an important role to play in enhancing wellbeing and quality of life. In their definition of food ahead of the second International Congress on Nutrition, the Public Interest Civil Society Organizations acknowledge the broad contribution of food and nutrition in our lives by stating:

It is our common understanding that food is the expression of values, cultures, social relations and people’s self-determination, and that the act of feeding oneself and others embodies our sovereignty, ownership and empowerment. When nourishing oneself and eating with one’s family, friends, and community, we reaffirm our cultural identities, our ownership over our life course and our human dignity. Nutrition is foundational for personal development and essential for overall wellbeing.

(Public Interest Civil Society Organizations 2014: 2)

This definition recognizes the multiple dimensions of food and eating and the roles that it plays in the lives of individuals, households, communities, nations and globally.

Eating is an everyday event that is part of everyone’s lives. While this seems a fairly unremarkable statement to make, it is important to ponder because it means that what we eat constantly changes in response to the changes in the world around us. These changes can be at the individual (e.g. changes in work status), household (e.g. changes in relationships and who is in the household), community (e.g. changes in the proximity of food retail outlets), national (e.g. changes in competition laws regarding supermarkets) and global levels (e.g. free trade agreements that open up markets to global multinational food companies). There is also a reciprocity in our response to these changes, in that they too change the world around us. As eating is a daily activity, our actions change the nature of food gradually, but constantly. For example, the increase in women’s participation in the workforce has influenced the nature of domestic food work, urbanization has influenced the increase in food consumed outside the
home and exposure to other foods and cultures through travel and the internet has influenced a greater diversity of food tastes and ingredients beyond traditional local cuisines.

There are many commentaries on the nature of these changes and their socio-cultural, environmental, educational, economic and health consequences. Authors describe a ‘gastronomic revolution’ (Bifulco & Caruso 2007: 2058), a ‘culinary skills transition’ (Lang & Caraher 2001: 2), the ‘industrial eater’ (Berry 1990), and the ‘passive consumer, unwilling or unable to make informed decisions about the food they eat’ (Begley & Gallegos 2010b: 26).

Irrespective of their paradigm, these commentaries all describe a period of rapid change in the past century. They assert that these changes have impacted on food intake, food preparation and rituals of eating. The commentaries differ in viewing these changes as a loss, a trend, a transition or an evolution; something that must be halted or something that must be adapted to. While it is true that there have been significant changes in how, what, when and with whom we eat, it is important to acknowledge that individuals, households, communities, nations and global factors have all had a part in shaping that.

Among this discussion, the term ‘food literacy’ has emerged. Its use in the literature, policy and practice implies that the term is an attempt to encapsulate the knowledge, skills and behaviours needed for everyday eating. This is echoed in contemporary public food and nutrition policies and plans throughout the world that have begun to recognize that these documents need to connect with the everyday practicalities of eating. The term is most often applied to the outcome of nutrition but is also applied to other food related outcomes, particularly environmental sustainability, informed consumerism, active citizenship and food security. This chapter will first review the use of the term in policy and practice, and then go on to review what is known about contemporary food and eating and its influence on the emergence of this term.

The use of the term in policy and practice

Food literacy in policy

Recent local, national and international nutrition policies and plans echo the sentiments of the practitioners they guide in calling for a renewed emphasis on the practical food aspects of nutrition and connecting nutrition messages with food solutions. The International Union of Nutrition Science’s Giessen Declaration calls for a ‘new nutrition science’ that extends beyond a ‘biological science’ to include a comprehensive understanding of ‘how food is grown, processed, distributed, sold, prepared, cooked and consumed’ (International Union of Nutrition Sciences 2005). The Rome Declaration affirms the need for nutrition action to engage with all elements of the food system and for individuals, communities, governments and nations to have the knowledge and skills for informed action (Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization 2014). The Public Interest Civil Society Organizations’
definition of food described previously further supports this by recognizing the cultural and social position of nutrition within everyday food and eating.

This points to a broad set of knowledge, skills and behaviours that come into play when feeding individuals, communities and nations. The United Kingdom’s *Foresight Report on Obesity*, the European Union’s *Discussion Paper on Sustainable Food Consumption*, the Conference Board of Canada’s *What’s to Eat?* report and the United States Institute of Medicine’s Committee on *Accelerating Progress in Obesity Prevention* report all use the term ‘food literacy’; however, its meaning varies from its application to sustainable food to instruction on dietary guidelines in schools (Conference Board of Canada 2013; Glickman et al. 2012; Reisch, Lorek & Bietz 2011; Vandenbroeck, Goossens & Clemens 2007).

The Australian example demonstrates how food literacy is implicitly and explicitly expressed in food and nutrition policy. The *Australian Dietary Guidelines* identify ‘low levels of food literacy’ (National Health and Medical Research Council 2013: 8) as a possible barrier to compliance with these recommendations and as one of the significant social and environmental changes that have led to the increasing prevalence of overweight and obesity (National Health and Medical Research Council 2013). The Australian *National Food Plan* identified ‘a food literate community accessing safe, affordable and nutritious food’ as a key goal (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestries 2012). Consultation papers for the Australian Health and Physical Education Curriculum and National Food Policy attracted several submissions calling for a recognition of the practical skills aspects of healthy eating (Australian Curriculum and Assessment Reporting Authority 2012; Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestries 2012). The *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Nutrition Strategy and Action Plan* identifies skills in cooking, budgeting and food selection, food preparation areas, storage facilities for food, cooking equipment and other health hardware as key issues to progress in order to improve nutritional status (Strategic Intergovernmental Nutrition Alliance 2001).

**The practitioner context**

Governments and practitioners are currently investing in strategies to address components of food literacy which they intuitively believe to be useful. Evaluation, if conducted, is often limited to process, such as use of recipes, and impact level, such as confidence in cooking and changes in awareness of nutrition recommendations (Herbert et al. 2014; Rees et al. 2012; Reicks et al. 2014). Food literacy is inconsistently defined and measured. The practical dimensions of everyday eating do not form part of any national monitoring or surveillance systems against which progress can be benchmarked.

In the health sector, food literacy work is undertaken by a range of practitioners, particularly nutritionists. However, what their role is in this space, what behaviours they can hope to modify and what outcome they are aiming to influence by addressing food literacy are unclear. As a result, nutritionists and their managers may not consider this very practical nutrition work legitimate.
Addressing food literacy is likely to have benefits well beyond physical health both at an individual and community level. Outside the nutrition paradigm, food is used by a range of health, education and welfare service practitioners to build rapport, self-confidence, self-efficacy, empowerment and social inclusion. In the welfare sector food literacy is being addressed in the context of life skills for those experiencing multiple levels of disadvantage. Food literacy is likely to be both a risk factor and an asset for food security, but this relationship is unknown and unexplored. In the agriculture and food production sectors, food literacy is linked to the origins of food, including the environmental, ethical and ecological implications of food choice (Bellotti 2010; Farnworth, Thomas & Jiggins 2008). Gastronomes and governments in nations with more famous food cultures talk about maintaining or enhancing a food culture where food literacy includes an appreciation and understanding of flavour and quality, the pleasure and artistry of food production and convivial eating (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries n.d.; UNESCO 2010, 2013).

The public context

High profile advocates have weighed into the debate regarding optimal government investment in nutrition, most notably celebrity chef Jamie Oliver (Oliver 2010) and several other local examples (Alexander 2010). These programmes tend to extend the knowledge and skills of an already engaged client rather than shift the non-engaged (Flego et al. 2014). The effectiveness and sustainability of these substantial investments are yet to be established. It is particularly unclear if these programmes serve to contribute to the celebrity’s brand rather than the health issue. What remains salient, however, is that interventions should not further marginalize and stigmatize disadvantaged groups but rather support the generation of a common healthy food culture of empowerment, sustainability and informed food citizenship. Food literacy needs to be framed as an essential life skill, irrespective of social class, which empowers an individual to take control over what they eat (Caraher & Lang 1999). This should reflect the different lives people live.

Beyond the nutrition paradigm

Acknowledging that nutrition is only one of the many outcomes of eating, it is interesting to consider the positioning of food literacy in public health nutrition strategies. Caraher warns against the linking of food literacy to only one agenda, such as obesity, as this diminishes its importance in the broader context and threatens to cut short investment in the area (Caraher & Seeley 2010). It may be that a nutrition outcome is not the most appropriate measurable end-point of food literacy. Nutrition may be better positioned as a consequential by-product on the way to meeting other more highly prioritized needs such as social connectedness, financial management, ecological sustainability or food
security. The concept of sustainable diets may be a more useful outcome for food literacy (Burlingame & Dernini 2010).

**Contemporary food and eating**

Public policies, plans and practice aim to improve the lives of the people they serve. If food literacy is considered a resource for everyday life, then it is useful to reflect on what is known about contemporary food and eating. This following section reviews the evidence to support key themes that are reflected in the published use of the term food literacy.

**Food and physical health**

There is irrefutable evidence that the prevalence of overweight and obesity is high and has increased over time (Cook, Rutishauser & Seeling 2001; World Health Organization 2010). Increased food intake and decreased physical activity are established risk factors for overweight and obesity (World Health Organization 2010). Additionally, poor food choice impacts on non-communicable disease and overall wellbeing, independent of its contribution to body weight (National Health and Medical Research Council 2003). Non-communicable disease has now overtaken communicable disease with respect to global deaths (World Health Organization 2014). This is related to the poor nutritional quality of food rather than insufficient calories as had occurred previously. In low and middle income countries, this has been described as a ‘nutrition transition’ in which starvation is occurring alongside rapidly increasing rates of obesity. Globally, diets are consistently shifting away from these recommendations as core foods are replaced by high sugar, high fat, high salt, ready to eat processed foods (World Health Organization 2014).

Despite calls to consider social, cultural, economic and environmental systems, nutrition recommendations predominantly continue to remain within a biological frame (National Health and Medical Research Council 2011, 2013). In doing so, recommendations fail to acknowledge the ‘day-to-dayness’ of healthy eating. Diet-related disease typically develops over a lifetime of poor eating habits, and prevention, therefore, involves maintaining healthy habits over the long term (World Health Organization 2004). Consistency in diet quality over a lifetime is a critical element to the relationship between diet and health. It is implied in recommendations and practice, but not specifically and typically addressed. Food literacy may be a useful construct to describe the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to consistently meet food needs through change and over time.

**Domestic food preparation**

Nutritionists’ interest in meal preparation, food skills and cooking is underpinned by the assumption that they will be associated with a higher intake of
core foods, increased dietary variety and a greater control over the nutritional quality of foods eaten. Evidence to support the link between preparing food and diet quality comes predominantly from cross-sectional studies which aim to demonstrate an association between the two, and evaluation of cooking programmes. Both have their methodological problems which weaken the strength of this evidence. Most significant is the ability to consistently define what is meant by food preparation, and identify and measure the aspects which may influence diet quality.

Despite this, there is some evidence of the link between food preparation and healthy eating. Studies suggest a positive association between diet quality and food preparation, but this does not appear to extend to an association with healthy body weight. This is most often an increase in the self-reported number of fruit and vegetables and a decrease in the consumption of take-away foods (Crawford et al. 2007; Larson, Perry, et al. 2006).

Time spent preparing food has decreased in some but not all countries and still takes up more time than any other domestic task (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). The US Time Use survey reports that time spent preparing food has dropped. The greatest drop occurred between 1965 and 1992, with the time levelling from the mid-1990s to 2007. Interestingly, just over 50% of people were involved in any food preparation, despite all registering that they spent time eating (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015). Food preparation continued to be predominantly done by women although this differential has reduced substantially.

The decision of who prepares meals tends to be based on expertise, enjoyment and fairness, rather than gender (Lupton 2000). The meal preparer tended to be the individual in the household who was better at it, liked it more, was more often home around meal times or was the main household manager (Lupton 2000). However, due to social and economic systems, women tend to more often meet these criteria (Blake et al. 2009; Schubert 2008).

Gender highlights the importance of context and broader social, cultural and economic systems. It also helps to describe the diversity of potential food literacy components, particularly beyond cooking. The dilution of gender roles in the provisioning of food may be a contributor to the emergence of the term food literacy. The knowledge, skills and behaviours used to meet food needs may not have been considered essential when this work was fundamentally only done by women.

The value and meaning of preparing food

Food preparation can be viewed as less about the end-product of the food or meal produced and more about the meaning of the process (Caraher & Lang 1999; Charles & Kerr 1988; DeVault 1991; Lang & Caraher 2001; Murcott 1982). Caraher identified that informal everyday meals were associated with convenience foods and fast foods, but special occasion meals involved some
element of cooking, particularly from basic ingredients (Caraher, Baker & Burns 2004). Blake observed ‘scripts’ for evening meals which were dependent upon the specific eating context (Blake et al. 2008). The values which inform these scripts, such as nutrition, socialization and convenience, were also contextually driven. These findings reinforce the seminal work of Douglas and Murcott in describing the hierarchy of meals (Douglas 1972; Murcott 1982). These are important points to ponder when one is considering the various outcomes of enhanced food literacy. From a nutrition and environmental sustainability perspective, it is the day-to-day food intake that is of greater interest than special occasion eating. When one considers, however, the broader role of food in social wellbeing, this may also be an important part of food literacy. This differentiation in the value of meals and its relationship to their preparation is important to note when determining how confidence and ability to prepare food correspond with the frequency of actually performing these tasks.

The imperative to prepare food also has meaning for those who have experienced disadvantage. In a study of Bulgarian food habits as they transitioned from a communist economy to a free market economy, it was noted that despite tripling in food prices, employed people tended to spend less time preparing meals at home and were less likely to grow vegetables at home (Florkowski et al. 2000). The authors note that similar trends were observed in the former East Germany, Czech Republic and Hungary. While at the time of the study, food service and food processing industries in Bulgaria were minimal, it was anticipated that they would proliferate. Studies of the proliferation of street foods in Asia in the past century have linked it with growing informal economies and changes in family structures which saw women with less time to prepare traditional meals with multiple dishes and men going away from home for work (Dixon, Hinde & Banwell 2006). These changes could also be a result of greater autonomy and empowerment following economic freedom with its expression happening through food.

Commentators have noted the emergence of cooking as a ‘leisure’ activity rather than a daily task to explain the popularity of cooking shows and books. There is, however, no evidence to support that their increase in popularity has translated into an increase in everyday cooking. British data showed people spent less time in the kitchen on a day-to-day basis but did view cooking as ‘enjoyable’ and ‘de-stressing’ (Caraher & Lang 1999). In the Australian Time Use survey, Australians spent slightly more time preparing food on the weekend than on weekdays; this was particularly true for men (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008). This indicates that weekend meals are determined for pleasure with greater preparation time allowed for, and weekday meals are determined by convenience with minimal preparation time. Convenience and pleasure also imply the presence of choice. Disadvantage is defined by the limitations of choice. The value and meaning of preparing food, and its relationship to diet quality, for these populations, therefore are likely to be influenced by their disadvantage.
Food preparation hardware

Access to the facilities and equipment, including fuel, will also influence the ability to prepare food (Bailie et al. 2010; Strategic Intergovernmental Nutrition Alliance 2001). Access to and use of food preparation equipment has been contrasted with other common food security strategies in a cross-sectional study of low income Indian households. This examined the relationship between food insecurity and foods grown for own use, use of soya (a locally available crop) and pressure cooker ownership (van Elsland et al. 2012). Of these three factors, pressure cooker ownership was most strongly protective against very low food security (compared with low food security) with this association remaining strong and statistically significant even after controlling for socio-economic status. The authors conclude that access to adequate equipment is a largely unexplored and under-utilized strategy in addressing food and nutrition security. Inadequate access to equipment or facilities is also likely to be of significance for those with unstable housing. Access to appropriate facilities and equipment may be an important policy issue for key housing and welfare agencies. Emergency accommodation, for example, is typically in hotels where equipment is limited to a kettle and possibly a small microwave oven which significantly limits the range of foods that can be prepared and their nutritional quality. For couch surfers, they often feed themselves in secret to keep themselves hidden from other household members and so cannot store food beyond a single eating occasion. In low and middle income countries the impact of facilities to prepare food is likely to be even more significant, particularly in the context of emergency and relief feeding (personal communication, World Food Programme and Red Cross).

Food supply

Globally there have been significant changes in the food supply and the extent to which dietary intake is made up of food prepared completely or partly outside the home. This is a reflection of shifts in both the food retail and food service sector. Data from the United States and Australia indicate that the majority of food consumed is still prepared in the home; however, the proportion of food consumed outside the home is growing (Smith, Ng & Popkin 2013).

Household Expenditure Survey data show expenditure on meals prepared outside the home is the single item that takes the biggest part of the Australian fortnightly food budget and that this has gone up significantly in the past twenty years (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006a). The amount and proportion of household income spent on food consumed outside the home differ according to income. Households in the highest household income quintile spent around a third of their total food budget on foods eaten outside the home; this was double the proportion spent by those in the lowest quintile (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006b). This could reflect the frequency of meals consumed outside the home or the cost of those meals.
There has also been an exponential increase in where food is available and the number of foods available to choose from. Supermarkets grew in high income countries in the 1950s, with this growth reaching low and middle income countries in South America in 1990s, Asia in the 2000s and more recently in Africa (Reardon & Berdegué 2006). This growth has been described as being driven by improved incomes, urbanization, female workforce participation, global media and time-poor consumers (Kelly et al. 2015). Free trade agreements and decreased regulation of foreign investment have further supported this growth, particularly in low and middle income countries (Hawkes 2005).

In Australia, between 1990 and 2008, the number of food and beverages products in a typical full service supermarket increased by 67% from 11,700 products to 19,540 (National Heart Foundation 2010). Supermarkets and hypermarkets are most competitive when they stock processed and packaged foods (Reardon & Berdegué 2006). Fresh foods, such as fruit and vegetables, are less profitable for this type of retailer (Kelly et al. 2015). Given that fresh foods are also those promoted for good health, it is likely that this dominance by supermarkets has created a dominance of processed and packaged foods in the everyday food supply. In low and middle income countries where the growth has been especially rapid, the health consequences are significant and alarming (Hawkes 2005; Kelly et al. 2014; Popkin 2004).

Clearly the increased consumption of foods prepared outside the home is real rather than perceived. The knowledge, skills and behaviours needed to meet nutrition recommendations, clearly, must interface with food prepared outside the home, as a reflection of contemporary food and eating. Food literacy as a term has evolved to reflect that this knowledge and skills must extend beyond food preparation.

The rituals of eating

Food intake is profoundly influenced by social and cultural meanings attached to food and eating. These include when, where and with whom certain foods and combinations of foods are eaten. This might broadly be described as the rituals of eating. Social commentators observing a ‘gastronomic revolution’ and the ‘industrial eater’ are as concerned with the changes in these aspects as they are with what is eaten (Berry 1990; Bifulco & Caruso 2007). Some authors cite the proliferation of the fast food and convenience food industries as applying new standards and expectations on eating; these include preparation speed, individual likes and dislikes being catered for within one sitting, consistency of end-product and the pace and environment of eating (Dixon, Hinde & Banwell 2006). Others describe an anomie or individualization of eating rituals resulting from an overabundance of rules about food, eating and nutrition (Fischler 1979; Kristensen & Holm 2006; Poulain 2002; Sobal 2006).

The relationship between these rituals and nutritional status is complex as their relative importance and value are culturally and socially constructed. Most studies which examine the relationship between the rituals of eating and
nutrition focus on two aspects: daily eating structures, particularly meals and meal-times, and commensal eating. These aspects are related as the conceptualization and definition of meals often include people eating together.

**Meals**

How a meal is defined and what constitutes a meal have been the subject of much research. Meals in themselves have been defined by the rituals that surround them regarding what, when, how and with whom they are eaten (Douglas 1972; Murcott 1982).

Keeping to a conventional meal pattern is associated with taking care of your body (Kristensen & Holm 2006; Poulain 2002). Nutrition studies often assume that following a meal pattern means meals are planned for and are more likely to be healthy. It is proposed that people develop a script or flow chart of what procedures to follow in a particular context when preparing meals or making food choices (Bisogni et al. 2007); for example, the evening meal is surrounded by values of a time to connect with family and friends, a time for relaxation and separating from the working day (Blake et al. 2008). It is also proposed that having a consistent structure around eating such as planned eating occasions will result in a more conscious eater who can better monitor their intake.

**Commensality**

For many, thoughts of a ‘proper meal’ include not eating alone. The importance of sharing meals has been formally recognized in Japan’s Shokuiku Food Law (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries n.d.), the Brazilian Dietary Guidelines (Primary Health Care Department 2014) and the UNESCO Heritage listings of the Mediterranean and French diets (UNESCO 2010, 2013).

Nutrition studies which examine commensality assume a relationship with healthy eating (Abbott et al. 2007; Demory-Luce et al. 2004; Larson et al. 2006). Findings of a US study are likely to be consistent in many countries in that most ate alone for breakfast, alone or with co-workers for lunch and the large majority ate dinner with others, usually co-habiting family. Around a quarter of people ate breakfast, lunch and dinner with others, around one seventh ate all of these meals alone (Sobal & Nelson 2003). A Danish study found that those who ate alone were less likely to plan their eating, more likely to control the amount of food they ate and more likely to eat high energy, low nutrient snack foods frequently throughout the day when compared to those who planned to eat together (Kristensen & Holm 2006). It should be noted that eating together does not always mean the food is prepared at home (Blake et al. 2009) and family meals might not mean all family members are present always (Gallegos et al. 2011). Sharing food is important in establishing and developing relationships. It can engage those who may otherwise be socially excluded or exclude and privilege groups and individuals (Sobal & Nelson 2003).
Conclusions

This chapter has introduced the use of the term food literacy in policy and practice. It has described key elements of contemporary food and eating that warrant particular consideration when conceptualizing food literacy. This book has been written at a time when this term is in its infancy. As editor, I have gathered researchers and practitioners, each working in different areas of food literacy, to present their thoughts on this emerging area.

This book begins with an overview of the use of the term in the literature, the history of its use in diverse paradigms and nations. Other terms used to describe the everyday practicalities of feeding yourself are also reviewed in considering what the term food literacy might add. Chapters 3 and 4 define the term and its components, and model its relationship to food intake and health status. These chapters are based on empirical research I conducted in two separate studies with food experts and then young people experiencing disadvantage. This definition and conceptualization is then further interrogated by examining its parallels with health literacy and its links with food choice in Chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

Food literacy is highly contextual and, as this chapter has explored, our contemporary food system is complex and not equally available to all people. In describing food literacy as the knowledge, skills and behaviours to meet food needs, the influence of broader social, economic, cultural and geographic factors must be acknowledged. In Chapter 7, food literacy is deconstructed to consider the development of personal knowledge, skills and behaviours from the perspective of both victim blaming and capacity building. Chapter 8 further explores the tensions between agency and systems by focusing on food literacy and food security.

The book then explores the development of food literacy. Three key settings of health, schools and food production are examined in more detail. Chapter 13 discusses the measurement of food literacy. In particular, what are the key considerations in developing a measure and what already exists that might be useful? We conclude with a conversation about what all the ideas presented in this book mean for practice and policy in food literacy. What are the key concepts to take away and what are the bits that still need wrestling with?

I hope this book is of use to both new and experienced practitioners. My aim was to gather key thinkers in this field to document their ideas in one spot, not in an effort to provide a definitive guide on food literacy but rather to create a starting point for further work in this area. Food literacy emerged as a term to acknowledge the broad role food and eating play in our lives and the empowerment that comes from meeting food needs well. The pioneers of this term used ‘literacy’ to convey that food and eating is at the centre of everyone’s lives. It certainly is for the authors of this book! I hope you enjoy their contributions.

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