In today's world, “literacy” is strongly associated with competence: the ability to read and write is the pre-condition for the acquisition of all kinds of knowledge and skills. The basic rule of thumb is: “No literacy, no education.”

A comment on last week’s post “Literacy – the power code” questions this ubiquitous connection between literacy and competence, and asks about other ways of learning: what about the son of a shoe-maker who learns by observation and participation? Or the daughter of a carpenter who is similarly apprenticed into the trade? Even without literacy, are they not competent and educated?

They sure are! There can be no doubt that it is possible to achieve an education, to become competent and to gain wisdom by learning from your elders and without engaging in literacy-mediated learning.

However, in a world that has a literacy fetish, as ours does, this kind of education and knowledge becomes devalued. Where knowledge and competence associated with literacy are highly valued, knowledge and competence associated with traditional ways are simultaneously discounted.

In fact, the elevation of literacy-associated knowledge over other forms of knowledge has long been a part of colonial projects.
Consider the ways we think about our relationship to the land on which we live: you might live on a plot of land or in a house and take good care of it; you might make sure it is maintained well and is a good place to live; you might tend to the plants and animals who live there; and you might make sure it will be a good place to live that provides shelter and food not only for yourself but also for your children and generations to come.

To be able to do that surely makes you a competent person and a wise and good human being. But what if you do all that but don’t hold a title to the land? If you don’t have a piece of writing that says this plot of land and this house is yours? You might not be able to do any of these good things and, even if you do, your efforts will not be much valued by society.

Now let’s consider the opposite case: you hold a title to a plot of land – i.e. you have a piece of writing that says the land is yours – and you go about destroying the land: you despoil its natural resources, exterminate the plants and animals, poison the water and generally ruin it, also for your neighbors and for those who come after you. While this sounds despicable, it happens all the time and, by and large, as a society we approve of such practices because there is that piece of paper that confers ownership and all kinds of associated property rights.

Our contemporary belief in the power of a piece of writing – the title deed – devalues all other ways of relating to the land on which we live, as is well-illustrated by the idea of terra nullius: the idea that, prior to European settlement, Australia was “a land belonging to no one”.

Terra nullius became one of the legal and moral justifications for the British colonization of Australia: the assumption was that the continent had not belonged to anyone until Europeans “found” it. While Aboriginal people had obviously lived in Australia prior to 1788, they were not seen as having a right to the land between Governor Bourke’s 1835 proclamation of terra nullius and the first successful native title claim in the Mabo case of 1992.

One of the indicators why Aboriginal people supposedly did not have a right to their land lay in the fact that they did not have any written ownership records or title deeds. Instead of recording their ownership of the land in written title deeds, Aboriginal Australians had a spiritual relationship to the land which they communicated through stories and songs, as the Papunya School Book of Country and History explains:

When the Tjulkura [= white people] came to Australia, they did not recognise that, between them, different groups of Aboriginal people owned all the continent. Because there were no pieces of paper saying which people belonged to which country, white people decided that the land was terra nullius. [...] The Tjulkura did not understand that Aboriginal people had been recording their ownership of their country in songs, stories, dances and paintings since the time when law began.

To Europeans, knowledge recorded in and transmitted via “songs, stories, dances and paintings” seemed primitive and barbaric: in short, worthless.

That only literacy-mediated knowledge has value is, in this case, obviously a self-serving fallacy. However, it is easy to overlook this fallacy in our literacy-obsessed world. Imagine if we routinely thought about the human
relationship to the earth not as one of ownership but as one of custodianship. Maybe some of the ecologic:

disasters of our time could have been avoided if we were not so fixated on the power of written documents to establish knowledge and competence? And if we were less keen to discard and ignore all other forms of knowledge?

Can you think of other examples where forms of knowledge and learning that are not mediated through literacy are being devalued in favor of knowledge and learning that are associated with literate practices?

Further reading

If you want to read more about the colonization of Australia as a project that has partly been about imposing British ways of seeing and discarding Aboriginal ways of seeing, you might want to check out Chapter 3 of the newly released second edition of *Intercultural Communication*. A flier with a discount code is available here.