Slogans Indeed: A Reply to Hirsch

To move beyond the slogans, educators must realize that cultural literacy cannot be scientifically prescribed; it evolves from the complexity of children’s backgrounds and experiences, both at home and school.

Professor Hirsch aroused my suspicions in the opening line of his article by employing that all-inclusive pronoun we to assert "... we have assumed that the early curriculum should be 'child centered' and 'skill centered.' " Although I am a firm believer in children and skills, I don't like to be taken for granted as a reader and included in propositions without my assent. Thus I looked closely at the pattern of argument Professor Hirsch used to attack the ways in which "we are alleged to have accepted three slogans and with apparent thoughtlessness implemented them in "our" schools.

Professor Hirsch's rhetoric consists of stating three "slogans"; attributing them broadly to a variety of educators, most of them said to be "disciples" of Dewey and Kilpatrick; then arguing that the slogans are half-truths that need to be overturned. The slogans were phrased in his own language in the first place, in the rhetorical strategy of the "straw man," an argument created for the very purpose of being knocked down. I don't want to dismiss his essay as "mere rhetoric." But neither am I prepared to argue for the validity of the three slogans, particularly since they are coinings of Professor Hirsch's realm and reality, not necessarily "ours." Thus, I will identify some key issues in teaching culture and literacy that I hope the reader will find more fully dimensional than his view of cultural literacy, which seems to me a form of cultural indoctrination rather than genuine education.

Background for Literacy

On the matter of home versus school learning, for example, he alludes to a "recent consensus among reading researchers that adequate literacy depends upon the specific information called 'cultural literacy.' " This assertion is not accurate. To the extent that a consensus exists among reading researchers, it does not include a mandate to "impart traditional literate culture to children at the earliest possible age." A considerable amount of reading research does emphasize the informational background of the reader, but "background" includes not only factual information, but also the experiences, attitudes, and values the reader brings to a text.

Reading is much more than simply comprehending words on a page; it is an active process of "meaning making," of synthesizing diverse ideas and experiences and meshing them with a decodable text. Although what Professor Hirsch calls "traditional literate culture" may be a part of that background, it is by no means the most critical aspect of it. Home values and home learning have a powerful effect on literacy, as do experiences inside and outside the school. Most critically, the stream of reading research he cites states emphatically that background information is not something that should be force-fed to inexperienced readers. Such a conclusion is not "defeatist"; it simply recognizes that background for literacy is acquired in complex ways.

No Golden Age of Literacy

Professor Hirsch uses the example of history to support his argument that school matters; but his reading of history is highly selective, once again leading him to declare a mandate for obligatory cultural literacy where none exists. He presents the image of a golden era of schooling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when youngsters studied text-
books with common content and supposedly mastered a common literate culture. Yet Professor Hirsch seems to take the existence of texts themselves as evidence that youngsters actually learned the material in them (an error few present-day teachers and administrators are likely to make). Further, he ignores historical studies that show there was at least as much criticism then as now that students don't know the materials of "traditional literate culture." 2

For example, the push toward college entrance examinations in the late nineteenth century was based on the fears of college professors that, despite the textbooks commonly used in schools, from the McGuffeys on up, children were not receiving "traditional literate culture." In other words, although the textbooks had some common elements (they were, on the whole, less unified than Professor Hirsch implies), there is little concrete evidence that children were absorbing the prescribed culture.

When one compares the differences between democratic education in the 1980s with that of the 1890s or 1920s, particularly with differences in student bodies, retention rates, and the socio-political purposes of education, it becomes increasingly clear that there never was a golden age of literacy. Further, there is little reason to believe that a prescribed curriculum of cultural nuggets will bring about that ideal. 3 One can accuse the children of being obstinate, boneheaded, and illiterate, but a more sensible approach might be to ask why cultural indoctrination has so consistently failed over the years.

The Role of Context
A partial answer may be found in the reading research Professor Hirsch cites so selectively. Many researchers recognize that facts and information are required as background to read successfully, but they are also aware of the role of context in learning. Information is retained only when the child can, implicitly or explicitly, see some purpose to it and place it in a context of previous learning and experience.

Such a view is not mindlessly "child centered" and should not be equated with the false notion of "relevance," which means "anything that sells or has facile, temporary appeal." Nor does it require discarding the classics in favor of TV culture or pop literature. However, schooling needs to be much more than "piling on of facts." A sensitive "piling on" of experiences, challenging children's powers of imagination and inquiry, may well be in order, for it is through assimilated, evaluated experience (as John Dewey observed) that facts as well as concepts, values, and even critical thinking skills are mastered.

Professor Hirsch is correct when he argues that "children thrive only as members of a community. From the cradle, they take to language and culture like ducks to water. They come into the world with an appetite for acculturation." Yet he seems to ignore the significance of this assertion. Youngsters with an appetite for learning don't need to be force-fed "traditional literate culture." Mother Goose will survive because she speaks to perennial childhood (and adult) concerns through engaging, enjoyable yarns, not because she is an obligatory part of the curriculum.

Experience Versus Indoctrination
How, then, are books to be selected? Professor Hirsch argues against "scientific principles" in curriculum design, but he also trivializes his discussion by reducing it to the word lists used in the preparation of basals. He's right to question the pseudo-science of the basals, but his scheme of "asking literate persons collectively to decide upon the contents that are required for mature literacy" presents no real solution and drifts perilously close to pseudo-science itself. In the first place, an honest scientific sampling of what literate adults know and read would largely duplicate the present culture, not lead back to "traditional literate background." I suppose if one fused the definition of "literate" to exclude certain elements of mass culture, one could get closer to that tradition. Still, even that is beside the point: over the years we've had plenty of committees prescribing curriculums, including cultural contents, and children have simply not learned from these curriculums to anyone's great satisfaction. 4

Language and acculturation don't happen automatically, but naturally, through extensive reading, writing, speaking, listening, thinking, and experiencing. Knowledgeable, concerned adults at home and school can consciously broaden the range of youngsters' experiences with culture and language, but they must not reduce acculturation to the presentation of selected bits of "traditional literate culture" in prescribed order.

Moving Beyond Slogans
I agree that it's a good idea to change a losing game. However, Professor Hirsch doesn't offer us a new game; he simply argues for a variation of the old one, a game that has never been played successfully. To design a new game, educators and the public will...
need to move beyond slogans and straw men. They will need to acknowledge that cultural literacy extends far beyond what "literate persons collectively" declare it to be. Cultural literacy is a process of participating fully and actively in society, a product of home and schooling, and above all of living in society. It is not something that will ever be mastered by "piling up facts" independently of the child's need to participate in that culture.


3. For a detailed examination of the myth of a golden age of literacy, see Harvey Daniels, *Famous Last Words* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983) or my *ABC of Literacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the Schools: Progressivism in American Education*, cited by Professor Hirsch, also clearly documents the failures of traditional nineteenth century education, particularly when directed toward children who were not members of the middle classes.


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**The Paradox of Traditional Literacy: Response to Tchudi**

Teaching traditional content is socially progressive, insists Hirsch.

As I understand the substance of Professor Tchudi's rejoinder, he joins me in rejecting the overly simple principles that I have criticized. His complaint is that I have tarred too many people with the same brush. He, for one, does not hold those principles as I have described them, and neither do many other educators. I accept this correction, assuming that Professor Tchudi is right, and I applaud the fact. I am, after all, opposing faulty ideas, not attacking people, and I wish to be part of a collective effort toward school reform, not a mere oppositionist. To the extent that Dr. Tchudi's views are representative, I could not be more pleased that the
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