

Cultural Literacy:

What Every Educator Needs to Know

152 Appendix: What Literate Americans Know

THE LIST

1066

1492

1776

1861-1865

1914-1918

1939-1945

abbreviation (written English)

abolitionism

abominable snowman

abortion

Abraham and Isaac

Absence makes the heart grow fonder.

absenteeism

absolute monarchy

absolute zero

abstract expressionism

academic freedom

a cappella

accelerator, particle

accounting

AC/DC (alternating current / direct current)

Achilles

Achilles' heel

acid

acid rain

acquittal

acronym

acrophobia

Acropolis

Actions speak louder than words.

active voice

act of God

actuary

acupuncture

A.D. (anno domini)

Adam and Eve

Adams, John

Adams, John Quincy

adaptation

Addams, Jane

ad hoc

ad hominem

adieu

Adirondack Mountains

adjective

Adonis

adrenal gland

adrenaline (fight or flight)

Adriatic Sea

adultery

adverb

AEC (Atomic Energy Commission)

Agean Sea

Aeneas

Aeneid, The (title)

aerobic

Aeschylus

Aesop's Fables (title)

aesthetics

affirmative action

affluent society

Afghanistan

aficionado

Because he believes that memorized facts have been learned, E.D. Hirsch ignores the importance of *constructing* meaning and fails to realize that students will not remember what they do not understand.

From the book *Cultural Literacy* by E. D. Hirsch, Jr., published by Houghton Mifflin Company. Copyright © 1987 by Houghton Mifflin Company. Reprinted by permission.

E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* is a paradox and a contradiction. Hirsch has a point, but he misses the point; the book is half right in its major assertion, but half wrong in its major implication. The result is that readers, blind either to the book's correct assertions and erroneous implications or to its erroneous assertions and correct implications, are aligning themselves at opposite poles of reaction. We hope to quell this dissonance by recognizing the best of what the book offers and rejecting its contradictions.

Literacy in List Form

Readers are undoubtedly drawn to *Cultural Literacy* by its list of some 5,000 items "intended to illustrate the character and range of the knowledge literate Americans tend to share" (Hirsch 1987, p. 146). Knowledge of the items on this list presumably confers membership in the fraternity of literacy. Hirsch is now preparing a dictionary of associations for these thousands of bits of knowledge and a text of their acquisition.

It is highly unlikely that information fundamental to literacy can be listed at all, except to cite examples. Hirsch's major argument, however, is based on the assumption that the foundation of literacy is the ability to recall and associate a superficial level of knowledge, knowledge that can be acquired by memorizing the items on his list. By reducing the information necessary for literacy to a list, Hirsch inadvertently represents the basis of literacy as the pursuit of trivia.

Learning as Memorization

Consider the instructional implications to which this commits Hirsch. He openly endorses the dual proposition that "learned is memorized, memorized is known," at least for information that he calls the foundation of literacy.¹ For example, he points out that children at a very young age know the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem because they have memorized them. Thus, he reasons, learners of any age can know anything

they can memorize. Further, Hirsch dismisses out of hand the idea of developmental readiness. He says we needn't worry about teaching children things for which they are not ready, for "it seems self-evident to me that if they learned it, they were ready for it; if not, they were not ready."²

Here "learned" equals "memorized," and understanding follows learning. That is, learning (memorization) makes understanding possible; understanding, per se, is irrelevant to learning. It is perhaps on this single issue that educators disagree most with Hirsch.

Hirsch's Line of Reasoning

The major assertion of *Cultural Literacy* is that literacy is on the decline in America; that, true to society's suspicions, young people graduating from high school today are less able to read and write than were graduates of years past. The root cause of this decline, according to Hirsch, is that students today are not taught the basic facts and ideas that are the foundation of learning.

But Hirsch provides no indication that he has surveyed either curriculum guides or instructional practices that determine what is taught in school. He draws primarily on information and implications from two major reports. One is the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1986), conducted by the Educational Testing Service but commissioned by the National Endowment for the Humanities, on whose governing panel Hirsch sits. The other is the report of the College Board on results of its Scholastic Aptitude Test (1984).

Using these reports, Hirsch has defined "the great hidden problem in American education" (Hirsch 1987, p. 1) as the failure to provide students access to the wide-ranging background information that forms the foundation of literacy. He emphasizes the inability of young people to recall and associate historical and literary facts. His major claim is that this inability is both the cause of and evidence for students' failure to acquire what he has labeled "cultural literacy."

Hirsch also addresses what one needs to know to be literate. Literacy,

the ability to read and write, depends on two different insights of the learner. One insight is that words in print are associated in sound and meaning with direct counterparts in speech. Spoken language is encoded into printed language; the job of the reader is to crack the code to get from print to speech. This is correct, as far as it goes, and in fact represents the first and greatest insight the young reader must acquire on the way to literacy.

The other insight learners must gain if they are to be readers might be called "culture-cracking." This is the aspect of reading that most concerns Hirsch. The ability to read and write depends on the realization that words are associated with a body of remembered facts and details. In other words, literacy depends critically on the possession of specific information, some part of which all authors must assume in their readers.

Hirsch makes the point that regardless of their code-cracking ability, many of today's high school graduates are unable to understand what they read because they lack access to points of reference and allusion on which the meaning of text depends. This leads Hirsch to his major educational implication: that possession of a knowledge base common to one's literate culture is critical to literacy, that this information is directly teachable to all students, and that it should constitute the major curriculum for literacy in schools.

Hirsch contends that changes within our society cannot explain the decline in literacy he has described. Rather, many graduates today have not acquired the information essential for literacy because both their curriculum and their instruction lack the rigor of times past. According to Hirsch, there is no longer a core curriculum in schools, nor are academic demands made of students; for example, there is no "firm insistence that students complete significant amounts of homework" (Hirsch 1987, p. 20). Evidently, the proper, but abdicated, job of schools is information transmission; and the role of the teacher is to impart informa-

tion to learners in something like a catechism of cultural associations.

Great Ironies

Hirsch suggests that the weakening of public education has been caused by a curriculum emphasis on cognitive development. He believes that schools today emphasize the "why" and the "how" in learning and ignore the "what." Certainly, we do not deny that students today are graduating from high school woefully ignorant of much that one might expect them to know. The great irony, however, is that they are so ignorant because they have been taught in precisely the way Hirsch advocates.

Those who support Hirsch's argument assert that children should acquire a great deal of information about their culture in order to be considered educated. We are not disputing this truism, but we must ask how any of us becomes culturally literate. Surely, it is by reading, listening, writing, and speaking well and widely in the mainstream of our culture. By doing so, we integrate tens of thousands of items like those on Hirsch's list. However, such information—even language itself—cannot be learned piece by piece or listed item by item. Rather, it must be acquired in what appears to the learner a *gestalt*, an awareness of the whole acquired over time, as part

Students today are graduating from high school woefully ignorant because they have been taught in precisely the way Hirsch advocates.

The conception of teaching as transmission—as if parents, teachers, and schools were conduits through which culture flows—ignores the central role of the learner in learning.

of living in and comprehending a world that each learner must both invent and participate in with others.

Nevertheless, Hirsch characterizes literate behavior as something like "list-knowing." By implying that such knowledge equals competence, he reverses the process of literacy acquisition: knowing the list becomes the criterion for being literate rather than the result of being literate. With cause and effect thus shifted, Hirsch presents a list that can be directly imparted to students. Students can then be tested periodically to see if they can display not literacy but "list-knowing"—that is, can they pass a test on the list?

Over the past 30 years, public education has been dominated by this type of psychometric model: what is *objective* and *measurable* determines the educational agenda from kindergarten through 12th grade. Not only have test scores become the scale by which students, teachers, and schools are ranked; the tests themselves have become the basis of educational programs: another great irony. If learning is defined as only those things that objective paper-and-pencil tests can measure, then only teaching that produces successful scores on these tests is relevant. Although the blame for this

does not lie with Hirsch, his proposal will surely aggravate an already deplorable condition.

Beyond Factual Recall

Whether or not he intended it, Hirsch has promoted an egregious error: that the wholesale memorization of a list of words and phrases and the associations that go with them will enable children to understand their culture and to participate fully in it. Already school boards and the general public have begun to consider seriously a reductionistic form of Hirsch's proposal: that reintroducing memorization to the instructional program will result in the academic rigor that will improve education everywhere.

Before a person can acquire culture from information, however, that information must be set in a context. Each discrete piece of information must be placed in the account to which it contributes; and, moreover, the focus must always be on the narrative, not on the separate facts that compose it.

In our attempt to prepare young people to succeed in an increasingly technological society, our instructional materials and practices have too often ignored these sound principles. They have focused upon discrete pieces of information; they have treated natural intelligence as though it were artificial; they have made the computer the ruling metaphor in education; they have asked our children to be information processors. But when students' attention is continually turned toward fragments of information—the data of a discipline or content area or society—the information they acquire is bound to be disjointed. The rich, full, interactive context within which information complements understanding is lost. As John Dewey observed,

"Knowledge," in the sense of information, means the working capital, the indispensable resources, of further inquiry; of finding out, or learning more things. Frequently, it is treated as an end itself, and then the goal becomes to heap it up and display it when called for. This static, cold-storage ideal of knowledge is inimical to educative development (Dewey 1916, p. 158).

Making Meaning in Context

The point Hirsch seems to want to make but misses is that whether or not today's students can recall and associate, they almost certainly cannot allude and apply. But teaching culture from a list, using a dictionary of associations and a test of achievement, will not enable students to create a context; in fact, it will only exacerbate their inability to do so.

Today, as always, students must be guided to reinvent the very culture in which they participate. A culture must always bear the stamp of its current generation. The hardest lesson for any educator (or parent) to learn is that *telling* is not *teaching*, *told* is not *taught*. The conception of teaching as transmission—as if parents, teachers, and schools were conduits through which culture flows—ignores the central role of the learner in learning.

Meaning derives from the learner's participation in the learning. Most students today undoubtedly view the purpose of their education as information acquisition, while most teachers view their work as information transmission. As a result, students are graduating to the worlds of work and higher education in possession of varying amounts of knowledge but without the understandings that would make the content of instruction memorable. This is what Hirsch and others have observed but have failed to understand.

Participants in Our Common Heritage

It is not the emphasis on cognitive development but the reduction of education to a technology that is responsible for breaking the curriculum into discrete, and often isolated, fragments. These unrelated fragments make too little sense to be of use in allusion and application. The great irony is that Hirsch's proposal, as it is likely to be interpreted, will aggravate the very conditions in education he deplors. The valuable things he would have children learn will be trivialized if teachers ask students to memorize what they do not understand. Moreover, students will not remember this

content when they have not attached meaning to it. We must teach students to explore actively the literacy and the culture we want to share with them; only in this way do we empower them as participants in our common heritage. Knowledge, thought, and literacy are malnourished on a diet of scraps with no invitation to the banquet that is culture. □

References

- The College Board. *College Board Seniors: Eleven Years of National Data from the College Board's Admission Testing Program, 1973-1983*. New York: The College Board, 1984.
- Dewey, J. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1916.
- Hirsch, E. D., Jr. *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Kelly, Mary G. *The Beginnings of the Amer-*

ican People and Nation. Boston: Ginn and Company, 1937.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. *The Reading Report Card: Progress Toward Excellence in our Schools, Trends in Reading over Four National Assessments, 1971-1984*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, Rep. No. 15-R-01, 1986.

1. Personal communication with E. D. Hirsch, Jr.
2. Personal communication with E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

Thomas H. Estes is Associate Professor, Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903. **Carol J. Gutman** is a Reading Teacher at Seminole Elementary School, Madison Heights, VA 25472. **Elise K. Harrison** is an instructor on leave from Hampton University and a doctoral student at the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22903.

Mathematics Pentathlon[®]

A cost effective addition to a basic math curriculum.

Mathematics Pentathlon is a math curriculum supplement which provides a highly motivational format for developing basic mathematics concepts and arithmetic skills.

There are four divisions covering grades K-7. Each division contains five mathematically based games which use math-manipulatives, spatial reasoning, and arithmetic fundamentals.

Mathematics Pentathlon is successful

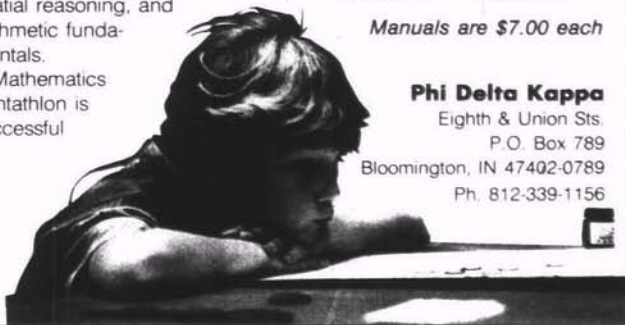
in special education classes. It is also used to broaden math programs in gifted and talented classes by implementing activities which develop routine and nonroutine problem solving.

- Division I — Grades K-1
- Division II — Grades 2-3
- Division III — Grades 4-5
- Division IV — Grades 6-7

Manuals are \$7.00 each

Phi Delta Kappa

Eighth & Union Sts.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402-0789
Ph. 812-339-1156



Copyright © 1988 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.