

Hirsch Responds: The Best Answer to a Caricature Is a Practical Program

The distorted image depicted by Estes, Gutman, and Harrison obscures the promise of the cultural literacy initiative to improve learning in all our schools.

At this writing, several hundred members of ASCD have written to the Cultural Literacy Foundation to join the Cultural Literacy Network. Their reaction to the essay by Estes, Gutman, and Harrison may well be disbelief. Those who find the attack plausible will be mainly people who haven't read the book and will assume that the picture the essay paints is accurate, that *Cultural Literacy* advocates stupidities like memorizing lists. But it must seem odd even to nonreaders of the book that an essay on *Cultural Literacy* should be so chary with quotations from *Cultural Literacy*. Estes, Gutman, and Harrison have persuaded themselves to a view that could not be sustained by extensive quotation from the book. Freed from the bonds of textual evidence, they have produced a caricature.

Without a National Curriculum

In recent times when the educational achievements of American school children have been compared with the performance of students from democracies that use core curriculums, our students are found near the bottom. Even when we compare our students' present skills with their skills of a few decades ago, we find that their literacy has declined precipitously since 1965. And one important cause of our rela-

tively poor performance among the nations has been our lack of a national core curriculum or its functional equivalent for the early grades. But, since a national core curriculum is politically unacceptable to us, we Americans must find ways to impart shared knowledge without instituting a national curriculum. *Cultural Literacy* can be summed up as an attempt to solve that practical problem.

Background Knowledge

To grasp the practical importance of shared literate knowledge for our whole educational system, one first

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needs to understand why high literacy is itself the key to educational progress in all domains of learning, including both humanities and natural sciences. High literacy requires knowledge of a wide range of subjects, and the same is true of learning. If our minds are stored with a lot of old information, we find it easy to make analogies that enable us to accommodate new information quickly. In short, both learning and reading depend on broad background knowledge. Thirty years ago, the College Board discovered that the best indication of higher-order skills is a score on a simple general knowledge test. Reading, learning, and higher-order thinking all show a high correlation with broad background knowledge.

But reading and learning skills depend on something more definite than broad background knowledge. They depend on specific shared knowledge, because reading is not just a technical skill but also an act of communication. Good communication between writer and reader depends on their sharing unspoken information. To read with understanding is to grasp both a text's literal meanings and its implied meanings, which latter can only be understood when reader and writer share precisely relevant background knowledge, as they do in countries with standardized curriculums. The quality

of learning and of reading is critically affected by the amount of background knowledge that is shared between writer and reader, and, analogously, between teacher and student. That is why the skills of reading and learning are deeply connected with shared literate culture. No active reading researcher—that is, no one who is thoroughly conversant with the relevant empirical data—has challenged this analysis.

Speed and Power

Estes, Gutman, and Harrison caricature the cultural literacy project as mindless memorization and see it as inimical to critical thought. That view would be valid if literate content were in opposition to critical thought or if critical thought were possible apart from shared literate content. *Neither position is tenable.* Those who stress the importance of advanced skills must come to realize that literate content is absolutely essential to the higher skills of reading, learning, and thinking—on the most fundamental technical grounds. The reason for the co-dependence of critical thinking and literate culture is as follows.

All intellectual skills depend on rapid deployment—the faster the deployment, the greater the skill. The correlation of skill with speed is explained by a fundamental limitation of human short-term memory. If an intellectual operation demands a grasp of more than five or six elements of a problem, then short-term memory will forget some of the critical components, and one's mind will have to start over and over, tediously, no matter how many skills one has learned to apply. The only way around this bottleneck is to have one's mind well stocked with knowledge that is specifically relevant to the problem at hand. That allows the mind to deal with a few integrated *chunks* instead of many atomistic elements in each new problem. It isn't enough to learn habits and techniques, important as they are; it is also necessary to learn the specific background information that enables one to *have* intellectual skills within a culture. Knowledge is not just power; it is also speed.

Necessary but Not Sufficient

The cultural literacy initiative can be a useful tool. But I hope and expect that no school or teacher or student will conceive of cultural literacy as a final educational aim. It is a necessary but not sufficient attainment of an educated person. Background knowledge is shallow; true education is deep. Yet the fact that specific knowledge is required for reading, learning, and thinking suggests the paradox that broad, shallow knowledge is the best route to deep knowledge. Because broad knowledge enables students to read and learn quickly, easily, and with pleasure, it is the best guarantee that they will read, and learn, and deepen their knowledge. True literacy has always opened doors, not just to knowledge and independent thought and economic success, but also to other people and other cultures.

The most constructive answer to a caricature is to create a practical program that works. The potential of an idea cannot be grasped simply by depicting its possible abuses. As Philip Sidney observed in defending poetry against its less imaginative detractors: "But what, shall the abuse of a thing make the right use odious?" Considering the evidence from reading and learning research, as well as from nations that use core curriculums, Estes, Gutman, and Harrison would be brave indeed if they were willing to state with absolute confidence that the schools of the Cultural Literacy Network will not outdistance schools that fail to focus on literate content. Network schools believe, on good grounds, that they will make improvements in all dimensions of education, including that of critical and creative thinking. □

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Author's note: Anyone wishing to learn more about the actual methods and materials developed by schools in the Cultural Literacy Network is invited to write to the Cultural Literacy Foundation at 2012-B Morton Drive, Charlottesville, VA 22901 for a copy of the *Network Newsletter*.

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