

# From Cultural Literacy to Cultural Thoughtfulness

A group of concerned educators evaluates the well-publicized arguments for teaching students to be culturally literate.

According to recently administered standardized tests, American students have poor recall of "essential facts." We are concerned about the interpretation of these data and about recommendations offered by Ravitch and Finn, Cheney, and Hirsch. Specifically, we are responding to the issues of content and process instruction, teacher evaluation, and student assessment as addressed by these authors.

## Content and Process Instruction

### Issue:

What are the essentials of cultural literacy?

### They say:

E.D. Hirsch, Jr., suggests that his 4,500-item list of words, phrases, names, and dates forms the basis for a broad body of knowledge all educated citizens must share to achieve cultural literacy.

—Hirsch, p. 68.

"What is needed in both subject areas and literature for all students is a *core curriculum*, a commitment by the schools to teach history and literature to all students as appropriate to their age and ability."

—Ravitch and Finn, p. 225.

"What we're saying," she said, "is that we should turn the critical thinking of children from media trivia and switch from 'Mr. T' to Martin Luther King to give them an important black figure who has something important to say."

—Ravitch, p. 34.

### We believe:

Developing extensive content lists that must be drummed into students' memory banks only exacerbates the problem of superficial learning that

already characterizes so many of our classrooms. Cultural literacy lists, like all lists, merely invite memorization.

In most instances, students fail to demonstrate knowledge of the "essentials" *not* because the material has not been presented, but because they are not involved in thoughtful interaction with that content. Because the content is not made meaningful, it is not internalized and, therefore, not remembered.

We need to do much more than substitute Martin Luther King for Mr. T. We must empower students to analyze, compare, evaluate, communicate, defend, invent, and create. We must empower them to become not merely culturally literate but culturally *thoughtful*.

### Issue:

Is emphasis on teaching thinking processes the reason why students are not learning (or at least not remembering) the "essentials" necessary for "cultural literacy"?

### They say:

"The culprit is process—the belief that we can teach our children *how* to think without troubling them to learn anything worth thinking about."

—Cheney, p. 5.

"If we are serious about equal opportunity, we must ensure that all youngsters acquire essential cultural literacy, the elements of history and literature that will permit them to read with understanding, analyze issues, communicate ideas and participate fully in the life of their society."

—Finn and Ravitch, p. 24.

### We believe:

No objective representative of critical thinking has ever proposed that we can teach our children how to think without giving them something worth thinking about.

No cognitive process can be taught without content, and no content can be memorized, internalized, or used in a meaningful way without applying many thinking processes effectively.

To isolate content from process is to render each meaningless. No one would challenge the need for a solid foundation in history and literature. However, merely memorizing facts does not achieve "cultural literacy." Unless students are directly taught how to use knowledge to analyze issues, make decisions, and solve problems, they will become living trivia libraries.

## Contributors

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## Teacher Education

### Issue:

Should teacher preparation/teacher certification include more content courses?

Should school systems allot time for staff development to increase professional competency and instructional decision making?

### They say:

Teachers should be given opportunities to become more knowledgeable about the subjects that they teach.

—Cheney, p. 28.

School districts should invest less in curriculum supervisors, instructional overseers, etc., and more in paraprofessionals and aides who relieve teachers of custodial and secretarial duties. This will give teachers time to study and think; it will put them, rather than outside specialists, in charge of what goes on in the classroom.

—Cheney, p. 29.

### We believe:

Undergraduate work should include adequate content. However, along with subject knowledge, teachers in training need opportunities to develop effective teaching methods for promoting meaningful learning of the subjects they will teach. To separate content from methodology is to create a false dichotomy. For example, instructors must model teaching behaviors that reflect sound pedagogy.

Teachers do need more time for preparation and reflection. However, simply increasing the number of paraprofessionals will not ensure an improvement in teachers' abilities. Inservice programs based on needs assessments and conducted by competent staff developers, curriculum specialists, and exemplary teachers are necessary. Finally, to truly empower teachers, these programs must include process instruction strategies, decision-making skills, research analysis and application techniques, and opportunities for personal reflection, intellectual interaction, and collegial coaching. Staff development should be ongoing and carefully designed to integrate excellent content with effective process strategies.

## Student Assessment

### Issue:

Do existing tests, which are primarily multiple-choice in format and deal with knowledge-level (factual) content, adequately measure the depth of students' content and process learning?

### They say:

*What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* based conclusions about students' "cultural literacy" on their ability to answer more than 200 multiple-choice questions about dates, figures, and events of literary or historical importance. Defending against charges that these items focus on "minutiae" and "trivia," the authors assert that the ability to comprehend, to analyze issues, and to communicate depends upon what they label "cultural literacy," defined as the knowledge of "essential facts" about the nation's past. These "essential facts," they maintain, should be taught and tested in our schools.

"One in three of the high school juniors (tested through NAEP) has no clue as to when Columbus discovered America, when the Declaration of Independence was signed, who Aesop, Atlas, Cain, and Abel are. . . . This is a sampling of the kinds of questions that together produced average scores of 55% on the history questions and 52% in literature . . ."

—Finn and Ravitch, p. 24.

### We believe:

Existing tests do not adequately measure student learning because they deal primarily with recall of "essential facts." Such knowledge provides a basis for understanding but does not, in itself, empower students to comprehend, analyze, and communicate effectively. Our assessment mechanisms should measure students' understanding of the concepts and relationships important to the various content areas, the strategies used to operate in these contexts, and the rules and conditions appropriate to specific operations.

Most standardized tests of achievement yield a consistent ranking of students with respect to a broad domain of learning, based upon a sample of behavior that is easily obtained under standard conditions and that can be evaluated objectively and consistently. Such tests typically consist of multiple-choice

type items intended only to sample the skills and knowledge that are most common among school curriculums nationwide and that can be assessed quickly, cheaply, and reliably.

Such complex processes as problem solving, decision making, goal setting, and strategy selection are simply not measured. We need to develop assessment mechanisms that effectively measure what we believe we are teaching. We should not judge the quality of our educational system by our students' ability to recall facts.

## More Effective Fusion

Already too much classroom time is spent at the knowledge level. In *A Place Called School*, Goodlad (1983) states that less than one percent of teacher talk requires student responses that go beyond the knowledge level. While we agree that our students must recall more effectively and appreciate the importance of knowing "essential facts," we see process instruction, not as the problem, but as the solution.

We must strive for a more effective fusion of knowledge and process in our classrooms. We must encourage both teachers and students to engage in thoughtful behavior. Finally, we must find ways to test what we are striving to teach: not merely cultural literacy but cultural thoughtfulness. □

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