
Whose Literature? America's!

After 200 years, we have a predominantly American literature curriculum. Now our programs must also evolve to reflect the cultures of all students, while maintaining appropriate intellectual and moral content.

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Does a literary canon exist in America's secondary schools? For years, charges have flown back and forth between two camps. Some educators claim that high school literature programs have hardly changed since the turn of the century. Others maintain that, as a result of so many changes, students are no longer being exposed to enough similar cultural content to enable them as adults to find common ground when addressing social issues.

After researching the results of surveys over the past century, I found that secondary school literature programs have, in fact, undergone a remarkable cultural transformation. To judge from changes in the top 40 or so major titles taught in the schools from 1907 to 1990, the programs have finally overcome their almost total subservience to British literary culture. After 200 years, we have a chiefly American literature curriculum, one that is still changing to reflect the variety of ethnic, religious, and racial groups now in this country. Indeed, other features of today's literature programs would seem to require much more attention than the charge of Eurocentricity has received. But before I discuss them, let's note briefly when

the transformation from a Eurocentric literature curriculum to an "Americo-centric" one took place.

The Surveys, from 1907-1990

George Tanner's report in 1907 was the first in this century to present tabulated data and gives us a useful baseline. His list was based on information he gathered from 67 high schools, grades 9-12, in the Middle West. Not unsurprisingly, of the 40 most frequently assigned works, only 9 were by American authors.

In 1950, George Norvell, a supervisor of English in New York State, published an extensive report of students' reading interests, based on data from 50,000 students in grades 7-12 throughout the state. Norvell found a number of works in the curriculum unpopular with students, such as Edmund Burke's "Speech on Conciliation with the American Colonies," *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and Macaulay's *Life of Johnson*. Their unpopularity in the 1940s is hardly surprising. On the other hand, it is worth noting that in grades 10-12, half of the top 12 works of fiction liked by girls were by female authors, suggesting that by the 1940s, a number of works by female

authors were already studied or read in school.

Trends toward an American curriculum can be clearly discerned in the results of a nationwide survey conducted by Scarvia Anderson for the Education Testing Service in 1964. Although the majority of Anderson's top 42 titles, gathered from grades 7-12 in 222 representative schools, are still British, 18 American authors are on it.

By 1990, the Americanization of the literature curriculum is clear. In 1989, Arthur Applebee reported the results of his nationwide survey, which closely followed the methodology used in Anderson's study. Of the top 43 titles he found required in grades 7-12 in 322 representative schools, 26 are by American authors.

Philip Anderson and I obtained similar results in a survey conducted for the New England Association of Teachers of English (NEATE) in 1990. In our study, 29 of the top 45 titles recommended and used by high school English teachers are by American authors. Interestingly, only 5 of these are on Tanner's 1907 list, while only 4 of the top 43 titles on Applebee's list are.

What the Results Reveal

According to these survey results, only 4 authors of major works—Shakespeare, Dickens, Hawthorne, and George Eliot—have survived the dramatic 90-year shift from a predominantly British, or Eurocentric, curriculum to a predominantly American one, a shift that has been virtually unremarked upon in the professional

literature. Further, while major changes in the curriculum had apparently already taken place by the time of Anderson's 1964 survey (only 12 of her titles were on the 1907 list), changes in the curriculum have continued to be made to these mid-century changes; only 18 of the 43 books on Applebee's 1989 survey are on Anderson's 1964 list, and only 16 of the 45 books on the NEATE survey are on Anderson's list. Finally, many major characters in the most frequently assigned works of fiction are now adolescents—as in *The Pearl* and *Romeo and Juliet*—and many of the top 40 or so titles for grades 7-12 are now suitable for students with moderate reading ability.

To judge by these lists, there does not seem to be any strong evidence for the existence of a canon in high school literature programs over the past century, if by a canon we mean a group of literary works remaining essentially unchanged from decade to decade. We do not yet know how much the content of contemporary secondary school anthologies has changed over the century, but the surveys noted here clearly indicate a cultural change over the course of the 20th century in the major works now read in the schools. Perhaps results from future surveys of contemporary anthologies will help us determine whether this cultural transformation is reflected in these texts as well.

Nor is it clear that a majority of our students today read the same works. Almost 800 titles were listed by the 322 schools in Applebee's survey. The 132 teachers in the NEATE study named 720 unique titles, only 328 of which were mentioned two or more times, and only 12 of which were mentioned by 20 or more teachers. The results of the NEATE survey, especially, suggest that one teacher's literature program may be quite different from another's, if not from teacher to teacher in a school, then at least from school to school.

Questions to Consider

Although we should rejoice that

What a 1st Grader's Parent Needs to Know

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In 1987, E.D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy* quickly became the center of debate over what our children should know. You either hated it, or you loved it. Now the first two volumes of *The Core Knowledge Series*, *What Your 1st Grader Needs to Know* and *What Your 2nd Grader Needs to Know*, edited by Hirsch (Doubleday, 1991), purport to offer the "fundamentals of a good 1st (or 2nd) grade education." With industry, government, and interest groups exerting pressure for increased student achievement, the debate over whose curriculum to teach will become even hotter.

Highlighting the fundamentals of language arts, geography, world and

American civilization, fine arts, science, and mathematics, both books are compact, with fewer than 300 pages of text, pictures, and brief suggestions for use. They are being mass-marketed to parents and schools through bookstores and supermarkets.

To parents, the books recommend discussing the material with their children "20 minutes per school day in the academic year." In homes where time to read and access to literature is limited, the anthology of poetry, stories, and essays, though small, is useful. To educators, the books offer only a skeleton for a core curriculum. The content will be familiar to most teachers, with many old favorites from children's literature. The information is intended to supplement, not replace, classroom materials—to be used "about 40 to 50 percent of

students' instructional time."

If these recommendations are followed, the series might be useful. However, Hirsch seems to imply a questionable cause-and-effect relationship between this core curriculum and student achievement. Two other implicit reasons for a balanced core of shared knowledge are at least as significant: the importance of continuity of instruction in a mobile society and the need for a shared foundation of accurate data from which to make meaning. The former makes the case for a common sequence of content area coverage, the latter for factual content. This does not exclude the need for thinking skills, although readers might infer this from the absence of discussion about how to use the materials most effectively.

American high school students now tend to be exposed to a predominantly "Americo-centric" literature program insofar as major titles are concerned, my analysis of the changes in these top titles raises a number of questions for English teachers and coordinators (Stotsky 1991a). I raise these only as questions because I believe that university researchers should not presume to tell high school educators what they should or should not do.

Intellectual content. First are questions about intellectual content. Are we in danger of losing our poetic heritage, the influence of the language and ideas of the 19th century British and American poets who have been among the most gifted writers of the

English language? Further, are today's students sufficiently exposed to adventure stories or works of humor to stimulate strong reading habits? In addition, are our most able readers studying works of fiction and nonfiction as intellectually complex and as challenging in vocabulary as students 100 years ago studied? Or have we "dumbed down" the curriculum for all students in a legitimate effort to accommodate an extremely broad range of students? The brevity and the vocabulary in many contemporary works raise this concern. Conversely, are we patronizing many less able readers and denying them an opportunity to become acquainted with longer, more thematically complex, and lexi-

cally challenging works?

Moral content. No less important are questions about moral content. Have we distorted or arrested character development in our students by providing excessive exposure to juvenile protagonists in the works they read? Should more characters of intellectual and moral maturity be available as role models in the literature they read? My concern is not the absence of moral issues (most contemporary works contain moral issues) but the absence of morally mature characters in contemporary works, of all ethnic and racial groups, "white" and "nonwhite," and of both genders.

For example, I've been unable to find any teacher who assigns *Maggie's*

The series will certainly draw fire for its seemingly "Eurocentric" bias and quite possibly for arbitrary choices of material for inclusion. Also, the highly condensed format — for example, words and letters, sentences and paragraphs, and punctuation marks all explained in four pages for grade 1 — may lead lay readers to believe that this is an adequate treatment of the material — a most unfortunate conclusion. Finally, coverage of content is not balanced: it's notably thin in science and mathematics, and there's no explicit treatment of technology or interdisciplinarity, nor any effort to integrate content between sections.

In addition to these concerns, prospective buyers should be aware of three issues. First, use by parents without substantial preparation and coordination with in-school instruction may further confuse children about what is expected of them, especially because the book's presentation is at odds with what is now known about how children learn.

Second, the books may be seen as a quick fix by both parents and teachers. Consequently, they may become a limiting standard for scope and sequence, rather than a partial platform on which to build a more comprehensive curriculum reflecting local needs.

Third, the focus on building a base of factual information underplays the importance of maintaining a balance between fact acquisition and development of the intellectual skills needed to use that base appropriately to solve problems of importance to the child.

As yet, no reliable empirical data document the costs and benefits of using The Core Knowledge Series. Anecdotal information based almost entirely on one school's experience is favorable. In September 1991, the Brown Foundation convened a panel of international educators in Houston to discuss Hirsch's concept of a nationwide core curriculum. The 60 educators generally supported the concept without going so far as to endorse Hirsch's particular selection

of content and sequence.

The concept of a balanced core of common knowledge and skills for all students is important. With a rising rate of transience in our society, a nationwide sequence of instruction is essential if students are to fulfill their learning potentials. Given that the time devoted to formal schooling is inadequate to meet the demands placed upon it, parental involvement in schooling is vital. Practically speaking, the marketplace is the only platform we have for developing a national consensus on the content of a core curriculum, and Hirsch is there first.

This series will be most useful when seen as a preliminary model, one of many attempts to form a consensus on curriculum certain to follow. The essential benefits that can evolve from a discussion of core curriculum should not be lost as the nits are picked. □

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American Dream, an inspiring story about a strong-minded black mother whose four children all became successful professionals despite racial discrimination. On the other hand, I've found a number who assign *The Women of Brewster Place*, a bleak story about mainly single black mothers and their children in a housing project. If students read both, fine. But if I had to choose only one, I know which one I'd want young

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adolescents to read.

The civic mission of schools. Finally, there are questions relating to the civic mission of the schools, a topic I've addressed at length in recent work (Stotsky 1991b). What are the civic implications of highly individualistic literature curriculums, if they exist nationwide? If our students have few reading experiences in common, will they as adults be capable of engaging each other in responsible public discourse? Clearly, English teachers must be able to change their literature programs in light of

changing tastes and student needs, as they have apparently been doing regularly since the turn of the century. On the other hand, they are also responsible, in a highly multireligious and multiethnic society, for creating and cultivating common ground through the literature they teach in all its many forms.

School literature programs serve civic as well as intellectual, moral, and aesthetic purposes, as E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987) and Mortimer Adler (1984) have stressed. If the variations in classroom literature programs from class to class and from school to school are as wide as the NEATE study, especially, suggests, then teachers of English might well wish to consider how the extremes of individualism might be mitigated. Although parents, interested citizens, school committee members, publishers, public officials, and other educators should have some voice in public discussions of this issue, secondary school English teachers should have a major voice.

The Task Ahead

The \$64 thousand question, then, is how can we best accomplish several important goals concurrently: maintain coherent intellectual connections between our culture's past and present; provide high-quality multicultural literature programs for all students that include the contributions of the European ethnic groups in this country (who tend to be omitted from the multicultural literature programs I've seen); and allow for individual variations from class to class, school to school, and community to community that reflect differing social interests? The best answer to that question, a challenging one to be sure, will lay the groundwork for first-class literature

curriculums in our public schools. []

The April 1989 issue of the *English Journal* carried an editorial and several articles on this topic by concerned high school English teachers.

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