

Cultural Literacy: Is it Time to Revisit the Debate?

by Bernard Schweizer

I went to graduate school during the height of the culture wars, when the debate over the place of cultural literacy in the curriculum and the legitimacy of the great books approach was still raging. The first college class that I taught, a section of freshman composition at Duke University, was structured around the theme “education and the making of knowledge,” with E.D. Hirsch and Paulo Freire figuratively butting heads in our reading assignments and classroom discussions. My mentors at the Duke Writing Program encouraged me to view proponents of cultural literacy like Hirsch and Teachout with massive suspicion as the purveyors of a narrow set of privileged, specifically western, masculine, White values masquerading as universal truths. I duly inculcated this vision into my freshmen, encouraging them to abhor the “banking concept of education” and instead to embrace the flexible, diverse, democratic, ad-hoc concept of learning propagated by Freire.

That debate, it appears, has largely been settled since then, as cultural literacy has been forced to retreat into its last bastion where, after licking its wounds, it is now enjoying itself within a circle of the faithful. Those culture warriors of Hirsch’s type, whom Michael Bérubé dubs “intelligent, literate conservatives,” are now mostly fighting a rearguard action on behalf of this mysterious creature called cultural literacy. But, it may have been unwise to discount their ideas too categorically and perhaps they deserve a second chance to state their case. After a recent,

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sobering experience in the classroom, I, for one, am willing to listen.

My awakening with regard to the merits of a shared basis of knowledge came while I was discussing an essay on global warming in my remedial freshman composition class. The piece, Bill McKibben's "Worried? Us?", compresses a good deal of the current facts and positions on climate change into four closely printed pages of a popular college textbook.¹ The text is supplied with some footnotes to explain terms like the "Kyoto Protocol" or references to H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, and the movie classic "On the Beach." But a host of other references go uncited, apparently because the textbook editors assumed that they do not need to be explained.

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Names like Henry David Thoreau and Job (biblical character), words including "Gandhianism" and "quixotic," expressions such as "something is in the offing" or "the excretions of our economy," as well as allusions like "the snows of Kilimanjaro are set to become the rocks of Kilimanjaro," or "we may all be hot, but some will be hotter than others," go entirely without footnotes. When I tossed out questions about what these words and phrases might mean, I got the following results: one student out of 15 could identify Mahatma Gandhi; none had ever heard of Ernest Hemingway; none had a clue who Thoreau was; two could identify Job as a biblical character; one had a vague recollection of George Orwell; and as for "in the offing" or "excretions of our economy," only one or two could do anything at all with these expressions.

Sobered by this experience, I turned the same questions into a quiz, which I distributed to the freshmen in my more advanced composition class. To get their attention and to make them give it their best shot, I promised a \$20 gift certificate to the campus bookstore for the student with the most correct answers. This captured their interest, but the results were almost equally dismal: only four out of 15 students recognized either Gandhi or Hemingway. Nobody could define "quixotic" and only one knew that "in the offing" means "something is about to present itself" (although I suspect that he got the answer from his Blackberry while I wasn't looking). This tells me that the level of general education is alarmingly low among the freshman population at my school. It further tells me that my students are not only hampered by a lack of factual knowledge, but that this shortcoming translates into problems with diction and literacy as well.

Obviously, without continuous and rather pedantic explanations from me, my students can grasp only the surface meaning of McKibben's essay. Their reading

comprehension is flat, anemic, and literal rather than deep, rich, and associative. They don't grasp the ominous implications of "in the offing," and they miss the ironic overtones of "quixotic." Take all the (un-footnoted) references to Gandhi, Hemingway, Miguel de Cervantes, Orwell, Thoreau, and the Bible out of McKibben's essay, remove all the idiomatic expressions and cut the literary allusions, and you end up with a deflated text that looks as if it had been gone over by a censor's pen in some weird dystopia. Little do we know that a large proportion of our young students are already inhabiting such a world.

While I may sound overtly alarmist, others may say that there is nothing to

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worry about. I will probably be told to shrug off my experience as a perfectly normal by-product of the democratization of education and the ascendancy of multicultural perspectives. Some will say, "What's so wrong with being unable to pick up references to a few historical figures, most of them dead White males? Our students are equipped with vibrant local cultural knowledges of their own." Others will caution me not to expect too much from freshmen, saying that it is my job to ensure that they leave the academy armed with a degree of common knowledge that they may not have when entering it. Yet others may be more concerned, agreeing that while a basic fund of knowledge should be expected of freshmen, my students are perhaps performing so poorly on general knowledge issues because most of them come from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., poor inner-city high schools) and diverse ethnic backgrounds (e.g., immigrants).

But here's the rub. If undergraduate students have never heard of Gandhi, Orwell, or Thoreau (or have no reason to remember them), they obviously have such a huge gap in general knowledge that four years of college education are not likely to make up for what has been missing since middle school. Although I may strive diligently to fill those gaps, I realize that we no longer live in a culture that encourages and reinforces a shared knowledge basis with regard to history, geography, literature, and the sciences. But that does not mean that this kind of cultural literacy has ceased to be relevant. Indeed, I believe it is still alive and well, but that it is now cultivated only in a narrow circle of the privileged classes. The reason I don't see much evidence of this shared knowledge in my own classroom is that I do not, as a rule, encounter the products of the country's elite preparatory school systems. What I'm saying, then, is that the issue of cultural literacy is socio-economically coded.

The problem with the argument that cultural literacy is irrelevant is that it does actually matter to some. It matters to the upper-middle and upper classes, who hold the reins of wealth and power. Those families who can afford to send their children to top schools can be sure that their offspring are inculcated with precisely the kind of cultural fluency that some are trying to persuade us holds no importance in today's diversified world. The more we argue the unimportance of cultural literacy among the general populace, the more we relegate the possession of this knowledge to the province of a socio-economic elite, thereby contributing to a hardening of social stratification and a lessening of social mobility. In the upper echelons of society, cultural literacy indicates belonging, and it signals the circulation of knowledge within tightly knit coteries.

I'm afraid that the enemies of cultural literacy have simply got it backwards: by downplaying the importance of a common culture and shared fund of knowledge, they play into the hands of the wealthy section of our society. These elites are not likely to forego the advantages that come with knowing how to situate utterances within their proper contexts, how to read information within a web of references, how to place events on a chronological timeline, where to place a location on the globe, and the meaning of concepts such as "quixotic" or "Orwellian."

To test my argument, I invite college instructors to give their students a pop quiz (you can say it's part of a research project on cultural literacy) containing 10 questions related to McKibben's essay. Ask your students to identify the following: Gandhi, Orwell, Hemingway, Thoreau, Job. Then ask them to define "quixotic," "in the offing," and "excretions of our economy." Finally, have them explain these allusions: "the snows of Kilimanjaro," "we may all be hot, some may be hotter than others." I predict results ranging from 0–1 correct answers for students from low-



income families and urban schools in poor neighborhoods; 2–4 correct answers for middle-class students; and 5–8 correct answers for students from privileged backgrounds.² If my prediction is correct, two conclusions can be drawn from it. One is the well-known fact that in the United States, educational achievement is directly correlated with family income. Second, and more importantly, students who cannot answer most or all of the above questions need to be taught differently. A program that increases cultural literacy is one way to boost their educational competence.

After all, those who do well on this quiz will be the ones who will understand the readings we assign them. To facilitate this crucial dialogue, no effort should be

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considered too onerous, even dusting off that old copy of Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* and putting it to work. All the names that I put on my pop quiz (Orwell, Gandhi, Thoreau, Hemingway, Job) are on Hirsch's list of topics that "every American needs to know." And even our old friend "all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" figures on Hirsch's "provisional" list of learning goals.


Speaking of goals, outcomes assessment is all the rage these days when it comes to measuring teaching effectiveness in college. This might be a good way to implement a cultural literacy program because it allows individual schools to determine how they go about teaching these contents. Hirsch had something like this in mind when he described his curriculum as:

"...simply a minimal description of elements that should be included in every child's schooling, no matter what form the schooling takes. The extensive curriculum can be taught in a highly formal traditional school or in a more informal progressive school. Any sort of school can find ways of incorporating these minimal contents in its courses, given a determination to do so and coordination among grade levels in deciding on the appropriate times for introducing particular aspects of particular subjects."²

Hirsch is well aware that knowledge alone is not everything, admitting that his "extensive curriculum is not a sufficient basis for education by itself."³ Critical thinking, creativity, and skills are equally important, but to teach the former at the expense of a common basis of cultural knowledge is undermining the fabric of civic society and deepening socio-economic divisions in this country.

Absent a serious re-evaluation of cultural literacy, I'm afraid, we'll end up in a society where a large part of the people will only know how to talk to their immediate in-group in a stripped-down, simplified argot. This will seal them off from

most opportunities open to those members of society who command a more solid grasp of shared cultural knowledge. I am certainly in favor of debate regarding what needs to be covered in a shared national curriculum. There's no doubt about the need to negotiate what should be included under the heading of "the great tradition," the canon, and all the rest. But while we should be mindful about the limiting effects of every defined body of knowledge, let us not throw out the baby of a modern education with the bathwater of cultural literacy. There is no excuse for knowing a whole lot about fashion fads or ephemeral pop-culture celebrities, while knowing nothing about Mahatma Gandhi, Virginia Woolf, or Mao Zedong's Little Red Book. How local, popular, and ethnic forms of knowledge can co-exist with a more formal kind of cultural literacy is the real question, not whether or not cultural literacy has a place in national education. That should be a given if, that is, we want to be able to hold common conversations among members of the polity in the future and if we agree that a well-rounded education is not the privilege of the well-to-do and already-influential circles in this country.

I'll finish by correcting a misconception of Hirsch's that students deprived of cultural literacy have "little chance of entering the American mainstream."⁵ This is far too optimistic. The American mainstream has already fallen behind an acceptable standard in cultural literacy, thanks, in part, to the work of well-intentioned but misguided young faculty like myself who fought Hirsch's ideas in the 1990s. Today, cultural literacy is owned by the upper-middle class, those who send their offspring to The Lawrenceville School, Phillips Exeter Academy, or Hunter College High School. These kids will do fine and will, in due course, accede to positions of influence, power, and wealth. For the rest, it will be an uphill battle to join the ranks of the elite, unless they are given a better chance at acquiring fluency in the ideas and facts that constitute cultural literacy. To oppose cultural literacy means to advocate a society separated into the haves and the have-nots with regard to a well-rounded education. It is not hard to guess who will benefit from such an approach. 

ENDNOTES

1. McKibben, "Worried? Us?," 763-768.
2. Feel free to send the results to schweizerb@yahoo.com. I would like to report back in this forum on the outcome of my survey.
3. Hirsch, "Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know," 128.
4. Ibid, 128.
5. Ibid. This claim is made on the book's dust jacket.

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