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Cultural Literacy and The American Public Schools

by Julie McKee

(English 102)


In “Cultural Literacy,” (1985) E.D. Hirsch, Jr. argues that there needs to be a reform in American public school curriculum. Students are not being taught or equipped with the necessary background knowledge and facts required to be culturally literate. “Literacy in this fundamental sense requires not just technical proficiency but also “cultural literacy” (Hirsch 129), he writes. Reading is a skill that entails more than just the basic grasp and understanding of phonics and vocabulary. It is a process that requires high school graduates to have a shared cultural knowledge of America in order to digest, understand, analyze and communicate to others what they read. This is not only to be successful in whatever they pursue, but also to be true members of a democracy.

If students know how to read, but lack the key cultural knowledge needed in order to understand and logically communicate what they have read, they cannot be classified as truly literate. Hirsch conducted an experiment with students at the University of Virginia and at a local community college to test his hypothesis that cultural literacy was necessary to comprehension. Their role was to first read essays on friendship, a simple and familiar topic, and the researchers determined that they were literate. Then, the students were given a piece that compared Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, and the once literate community college students struggled. Since Grant and Lee were, ironically, unfamiliar to these residents of Richmond (home of the Confederacy) their reading pace slowed down, and they had trouble understanding what was written. Likewise, an otherwise literate group of individuals in India had trouble reading and understanding a piece about an American wedding, just as an otherwise literate group of individuals in America had trouble reading and understanding a piece about an Indian wedding (Hirsch 129). All groups struggled with reading, not because of word choice or phonics, but simply because they were culturally illiterate. Having the proper background and knowledge of a specific culture is essential because published writers (in their respective cultures) assume cultural literacy in their readers.

In order for American students to gain knowledge not only of the world but also of their own culture, schools must implement “extensive” and “intensive” learning into the curriculum. Extensive knowledge is isolated, “atomic facts” (133), while intensive knowledge provides a model that shows how the facts go together. “Such intensive learning is necessary,” Hirsch explains, “because the mental model we get from the detailed study of an example lets us connect our atomic facts together and build a coherent picture of reality” (133). Just as facts need to be applied to an example, an example needs to be applied to facts. Therefore, extensive and intensive knowledge need to be taught concurrently. However, the
best time to get this extensive background information is before tenth grade, and the earlier the better. In early grades, children are fascinated by straightforward information. Our official modern distaste for old-fashioned memorization and rote learning seems more pious than realistic. Young children are eager to master the materials essential for adult life and if they believe in the materials they will proudly soak them up like sponges and never forget them. (134)

Teaching these atomic facts in grade school will build children’s cultural literacy, which they will ultimately use for the rest of their lives. Children will be determined to learn the facts because they want to be accepted as an adult and feel like they are a part of the adult community. It is the responsibility of American public schools to offer children the cultural literacy that some of them may not receive at home to prepare them for the writings that will be directed to them as general readers when they are older.

This same ability is crucial for all high school graduates in order to thrive and be successful in life. Even if some graduates go on to become brilliant scientists, but cannot explain the workings of their job to the “common reader”(130), then their true genius will be hidden from the rest of the world. In contrast, those who can decode an essay word for word, but cannot understand or accurately convey what they have read, have no literacy.

I agree that in order for students to attain the cultural knowledge they will use for their rest of their lives, grade schools need to incorporate extensive learning into their curriculum when children are most eager and determined to learn. However, Hirsch is perhaps too quick to scrutinize and blame all American public school teachers for students’ lack of cultural knowledge. Students should also be held responsible for their cultural literacy. Throughout my educational career I have learned about wars, historical figures and icons, state names and capitals, cultures of the world, and the list could continue on and on. The reason I cannot remember half of our country’s state capitols or what happened during the Cold War is not because teachers did not teach and test me on the information, but rather because I chose to forget it. I simply formed an attitude that is commonly shared among students, and teachers probably hear it at least once a day, “why are we learning this, and when am I ever going to use this in the real world?” Teachers teach the material that is required and sufficient in order for students to be culturally literate, but ultimately, students make the choice of either retaining the information, or discarding it.

During my seventh and eighth grade years, the one class that I dreaded each day was history class. I am ashamed at how little I know about our nation’s past, and I am to blame for my own cultural illiteracy—not my teachers. Each day during history class I came ill prepared; I had not read the chapters or bothered to memorize information until test day. The night before each test I often studied for hours until I knew every boldface vocabulary word, person, and event. I aced every history test I had during those years, but the tragic part is, I cannot recall basic events in history today because I forgot and discarded all the information I memorized. The tricky thing about keeping information current and accessible when it is needed, is that it requires frequent practice. Perhaps another reason I do not have the cultural knowledge I need at my disposal is because I am not regularly reciting and using the information on a daily basis. Teachers can supply their students with the appropriate background knowledge and “atomic facts,” but if students do not regularly go over the information, they are destined to forget it.

For example, when I was in kindergarten I learned the ABC’s. The reason I can recite the ABC’s today is because I use the alphabet every time I read or write. I also learned how to
add, subtract, multiply, and divide in grade school, and I still know how to do these procedures today because I use those principles when I go shopping and balance my checkbook. I learned how to find the hypotenuse of a triangle, but if an individual were to ask me how to do it today, I would not be able to because I have not been required to perform that task since my sophomore year of high school. In order for students to be culturally literate, they need to realize on their own that having the proper background knowledge is important for them to succeed. They might not need to keep the information current by rehearsing it and continually reading about it, but they will remember, if only vaguely, what they have learned, and that is what is important.

Hirsch also argues that schools need to implement “extensive” and “intensive” learning into their curriculum, but it already exists in some school classrooms. I work at a daycare at Evergreen School and the fifth grade students told me that they were learning about the Revolutionary War, and their teacher had assigned them the names of people from the war to research. They were required to find ten facts about each individual they were assigned, and then they had to share their information with the class. The children told me that they do many different projects that pertain to what they are learning, and it appears teachers are teaching extensively and intensively concurrently. They did also tell me, however, that once they learn all these facts, they tend to forget the specific details because the information is not used, and I understand. The students also told me how they are learning about the Stamp Act and Intolerable Acts, which I also learned in grade school. Then, the information was presented to me in high school again, and I had to relearn it all over again because I had forgotten it. In order for students to be culturally literate, they have to revisit information, and have a desire to keep learning new things.

In “America Skips School,”(1993) James Barber discusses how adult Americans pretend to care about education. “…but today [he is] increasingly persuaded that the reason for the country’s inaction is that Americans do not really care about education—the country has grown comfortable with the game of “let’s pretend we care”(154). Barber blames parents for their children’s illiteracy because the parents themselves are not literate, and they do not seem to care. “The illiteracy of the young turns out to be our own reflected back to us with embarrassing force”(156). Children learn about the importance of things from their parents, and if they learn from their parents that formal education is not that important, then more than likely, they will also share that same view. Barber reiterates my point that education is important, but being literate is a choice. Students need to care about the information that they learn in school, and continue to educate themselves after graduation in order to remain culturally literate.

Teachers and American public schools are not solely to blame for students’ illiteracy; rather, mature students know they are just as responsible for the information that they know, or do not know. Teachers are supplying their students with most of the background knowledge they need to be defined as truly literate, but students also need to have the desire to retain the information, and realize that it is important for them to know for the future, even if they do not truly understand why now. Then and only then will they be culturally literate in order to function intelligently in an American democracy.
Works Cited
