**Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know**


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We present two reviews of this book because we think that each has important insights to offer on this topic of national educational importance. —Ed.

In the period between the world wars the wealthy Chicago suburb of Winnetka, Illinois, was a model of progressive education and its famous superintendent, Carleton W. Washburne, a model of the progressive administrator. One of Washburne's most durable innovations was the famous Winnetka Plan for individualized learning, which pioneered in the use of workbooks and diagnostic testing. Not all his experiments were destined to be so consequential. One that made a splash at the time but faded quickly into obscurity was a history and geography "fact course" for Grades 4–6 designed to "make children familiar with those persons, places, dates, and events which are commonly known to intelligent people." Washburne believed that children must be in command of such facts if they are to be "reasonably intelligent" about those to which "frequent allusions" are made. The problem was to discover what these facts were. In order to do so, a social science seminar of Winnetka teachers patiently culled a list of over 80,000 allusions from seventeen periodicals covering the period 1905–1922 and ranging from the Atlantic to the Ladies Home Journal. The allusions were carefully weighted to smooth out the temporary prominence of a topic and to eliminate personal opinion and judgment. They were then incorporated, not without difficulty, into a fifth-grade course that began with "The Fall of Rome." This effort at what Washburne called "scientific curriculum-building" was part of the scientific-management strand of progressive education, with its commitment to measurement, accountability, and predetermined outcomes—and with its sometimes ludicrous scientism.

E. D. Hirsch's proposals for educational reform are also part of the scientific-management tradition, but they are shorn of progressive associations. By one of those wonderful ironies of history, this neoconservative reformer has unwittingly invented a 1980s version of the Winnetka list as the centerpiece of his program. He intends his list to serve as the vehicle for ensuring that all students achieve what he calls "cultural literacy"—the "traditional literate knowledge, the information, attitudes, and assumptions that literate Americans share" (p. 127). Hirsch's list, which he compiled from newspapers, magazines, and books with the aid of a historian and a physicist, consists of some five thousand separate allusions (yes, he uses the Winnetka term) to this information. The flavor of his list may be savored in such listings as "antimatter, antipodes, anti-Semitism, antitrust legislation, Antony
and Cleopatra (title)” (p. 154) or “winter of our discontent, Win this one for the Gipper, wiretapping, Wisconsin, wishbone” (p. 214). Although Hirsch concedes—indeed insists—that the information represented by such a list is elementary, superficial, and limited, he argues that “students’ possession of that limited information is necessary to their acquiring more detailed information” (p. 127). The list is descriptive rather than prescriptive, Hirsch explains, and it will change as some items pass out of the vocabulary of literate people and new ones enter. It will also grow. Hirsch reports that a much larger “dictionary of cultural literacy” is now in preparation.

Hirsch proposes that the list or some expanded version thereof constitute the content of what he calls the “extensive curriculum,” which would be taught in all schools and learned by all children but chiefly by young children, who he thinks will be particularly receptive to it. “They like to pick up adult information long before they can make sense of it,” he comments (p. 130). He leaves both the form of the extensive curriculum and the methods of teaching it up to the schools, asserting that the allusions can be taught in “a highly formal traditional school or in a more informal progressive school” (p. 128), although he clearly believes that a substantial amount of memorization will be needed.

Hirsch’s remedy for curricular fragmentation looks suspiciously like more fragmentation. Outside of the dubious claim that his list represents what literate people know, there is nothing that holds it together besides its arrangement in alphabetical order. Subject-matter organization is ignored. It is not hard to imagine how Hirsch’s proposal would have been greeted by educational neoconservatives had it been made by one of those professors of education who he charges are responsible for our current state of cultural illiteracy. How this hodgepodge of miscellaneous, arbitrary, and often trivial information might be put together into a coherent curriculum that would be both worth learning and learnable remains a mystery.

Even Hirsch has his doubts. He admits the merits of the objection that “students will memorize the bare items and learn nothing significant at all” and “will trivialize cultural information without really possessing it. How can I deny that such misuse of a list is not only a danger but a near certainty?” he asks (p. 142). In that case, why propose a list-based curriculum at all? One answer is that Hirsch seems to believe that to admit a difficulty is to resolve it. He summons up hope. He hopes that the very existence of a list will help people see that previous reluctance to identify “core information” has hindered the teaching of literacy. He also hopes that the finiteness of the list will “energize people to learn that only a few hundred pages of information stand between the literate and the illiterate, between dependence and autonomy” (p. 143). Can such a mechanical view of culture and education do anything but speed educational deterioration?

Educational reform has long suffered from historical amnesia, usually re-
ferred to as "reinventing the wheel." To his credit, Hirsch does venture into curricular history, but he does not venture beyond the shallows, just far enough to bolster his argument. In Hirsch's history, ideas float freely, unattached to historical contexts. The sources themselves seem to have been scanned rather quickly. For example, in discussing the significance of the 1893 report of the Committee of Ten, which was the first national body to recommend major curricular reforms in secondary education, Hirsch states that the committee advocated a "traditional humanistic curriculum." He thus sets the stage for the future drama of curricular fragmentation. Unfortunately for Hirsch's argument, the committee did not recommend a traditional humanistic curriculum. On the contrary, one of the reasons why the Committee of Ten's report represents a decisive moment in American education is that when it was issued the curricula of both schools and colleges were in flux with one area of contention being the bitter curricular conflicts between "the classics" and "the moderns." The nine conferences or subcommittees into which the committee's work was divided covered both, including three on the dominant school subjects or classics (Latin, Greek, and Mathematics) and four on the "new" or "modern" subjects seeking a firmer place in the curriculum (Physics, Astronomy, and Chemistry; Natural History; History, Civil Government, and Political Economy; and Geography). As the report pointed out, the latter four conferences

ardently desired to have their respective subjects made equal in weight and influence to Latin, Greek and Mathematics in the schools; but they knew that educational tradition was adverse to this desire, and that many teachers and directors of education felt no confidence in these subjects as disciplinary material. . . . In less degree, the Conferences on English and Other Modern Languages felt the same difficulties, these subjects being relatively new as substantial elements in the school program.²

By giving the old and the new subjects equal weight the committee helped to set hitherto untraditional subjects on the path to becoming traditional ones. To characterize the curricular recommendations of the Committee of Ten as "traditional" is thus to misunderstand in a profound way not only the report itself but the historical context in which it arose and the historical forces that created it and carried it forward.

Despite Hirsch's admiration for the Committee of Ten, he would not find in the report of its influential Conference on History, Civil Government, and Political Economy support for his ideas on the "extensive curriculum." On the contrary, the conference stated firmly that "the result which is popularly supposed to be gained from history, and which most teachers aim to teach, is the acquirement of a body of useful facts. In our judgment this is in itself the most difficult and the least important outcome of historical study. Facts
of themselves are hard to learn, even when supported by artificial systems of memorizing, and the value of detached historical facts is small in proportion to the effort necessary to acquire and retain them." The members of the conference could hardly have thought otherwise: The rote memorization then widely practiced in both schools and colleges was utterly antithetical to the kind of history they favored, with its commitment to inquiry, critical thinking, and historical explanation. The rich curriculum they recommended in history and civil government could not possibly have been created from an 1890s equivalent of the Hirsch list, nor would such an absurdity have occurred to its members.

Hirsch typically fixes the chief blame for curricular fragmentation on "faulty theories promulgated in our schools of education and accepted by educational policymakers" (p. 110). Not so typically, he has not much to say about the impact on education of the upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s, which neoconservative educational reformers tend to regard as the source of many of our troubles. Perhaps this is because Hirsch seems so oblivious to the organic connections between the schools and society. He waves aside the impact of television on the schools. He ignores social fragmentation and dismisses the breakdown of societal institutions for which the schools are so often asked to become surrogates. He has nothing to say about the specialization and fragmentation in the disciplines that have disastrously eroded the academic base for the school subjects that need firm grounding in broad rather than just specialized knowledge.

The popular appeal of Hirsch's book is due, I believe, to two factors. Like many other neoconservative manifestos, it taps into a genuine and often justified public concern and makes some telling points along the way. At the same time, Hirsch's formulations permit him and his readers to fix blame on an easy target, avoid confronting the fundamental issues, and find comfort in reassuringly simple solutions. If we are to address effectively the formidable problems of attaining curricular coherence and shared knowledge, however, we need tough-minded analyses and serious historical understanding. With its cheery tone, its anecdotes, and its upscale version of Trivial Pursuit, Cultural Literacy constitutes a diversion from that essential task.

Notes


3 Ibid., p. 168.
Cultural Literacy

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The reviews of this book have proliferated so remarkably since its publication that, by now, it has become part of what Hirsch calls our "background knowledge," or what members of our "speech community can be expected to know" (p. 68). Also, it has given rise to a whole school of jokes and pleasantries, most of them centered on Trivial Pursuit. My own initial response was to mock it by means of literary reference. Wondering about how young people would respond to the demand that they enter a single language community and master a specified set of traditions, I could not but think of Huckleberry Finn. Who does not recall the Widow Douglas's effort to "sivilize" him, and the way it made him feel "all cramped up"? Who can forget the following?

After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people.¹

Less well known is the following exchange in Don DeLillo's novel White Noise, which poses an implicit question to the whole notion of background knowledge and how it works in lived life. Here, Heinrich—who is a fearfully bright and technically apt adolescent—is engaging in conversation with members of his family:

"I've got news for you," he said. "The brain of a white rat releases calcium ions when it's exposed to radio-frequency waves. Does anyone at this table know what that means?"

Denise looked at her mother.

"Is this what they teach in school today?" Babette said. "What happened to civics, how a bill becomes a law? The square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the two sides. I still remember my theorems. The battle of Bunker Hill was really fought on Breed's Hill. Here's one. Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania."

"Was it the Monitor or the Merrimac that got sunk?" I said.

"I don't know but it was Tippecanoe and Tyler too." "What was that?" Steffie said.

"I want to say that he was an Indian running for office. Here's one. Who invented the mechanical reaper and how did it change the face of American agriculture?"

"I'm trying to remember the three kinds of rock," I said, "Igneous,
sedimentary, and something else."²

So it goes: an overview of the discrete components of the background information that does indeed hold us together. The difficulty is that it is not ordered or conceptualized; it is not only irrelevant, it is meaningless.

Obviously, Hirsch is concerned about meaning, and he makes the now familiar point that the “explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of an iceberg of meaning; the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader's own relevant knowledge” (p. 34). This, it turns out, is what “background knowledge” signifies (although not what he misleadingly calls background information at other times, implying a collection of atomic facts). Resting his claim on some of the best-known educational research we have at hand (Robert Glaser, John Carroll, Herbert Simon, Basil Bernstein, Adriaan De Groot, and many others), he places his emphasis on interpretive understanding rather than merely “decoding,” on the discovery of schemata or (I suppose) constructs, on the making of meanings. All this, as is evident, dovetails with the present-day preoccupation with the development of “higher order cognitive skills.” The overriding point, however, appears to be that the development of children’s reading and writing skills is largely dependent on their sharing a body of knowledge and cultural referents. This is precisely the same as the point made in the Office of Education’s compendium of educational research, called What Works.³ In an argument that strikes me as mysteriously circular, the report states that cultural literacy, identified with “background knowledge of the past and present,” is required for fluent reading and understanding of what is read. “Cultural literacy not only enables students to read better and gain new knowledge; it enables them to understand the shared heritage, institutions, and values that draw Americans together” (p. 53). Hirsch carries on the idea by suggesting that there is no other way of “entering mainstream literate culture” (p. 91). The mastery of skills, as he views it, is contingent on the mastery of traditional content.

This gives rise to a number of perplexities and, I would say, a range of questionable claims. Hirsch repeatedly attacks both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Dewey for what he calls their “formalism,” or the separation of skills from content (and even meaning). Giving a reader an intense feeling of déjà vu, he writes (after calling Dewey a disciple of Rousseau) that Dewey and his followers scorned “secondhand, bookish education” and, therefore, attacked “the abstract, rote-learned material of literate culture” (p. 119). Dewey’s pragmatic emphasis on “social utility” is then treated as a logical consequence of his challenge to the secondhand and bookish. “Thus, the most appropriate replacement for bookish, traditional culture,” Hirsch goes on, “would be material that is directly experienced and immediately useful to life in society” (p. 119). There is no question that Dewey conceived rote
learning to be useless if not miseducative, and mere bookishness to be irrelevant in the search for meaning, but he wrote, in *Experience and Education*, that “no experience is educative, but does not tend both to knowledge of more facts and entertaining of more ideas and to a better, a more orderly arrangement of them. It is not true that organization is a principle foreign to experience. Otherwise experience would be so dispersive as to be chaotic.”

It may be the case, as Israel Scheffler has put it, that Dewey’s antagonism to “pure theory” divorced from action and his tendency to “assimilate all reflective thinking to the problem-solving model” struck some as anti-intellectual. Hirsch’s attack on his work, however, as so influential on public education as to be responsible for its present insufficiencies and even for the erosion of “national literacy” evokes the old essentialist challenges to educational progressivism—and, once more, on shaky theoretical grounds.

By placing the onus on what he calls “romanticism” and “formalism,” Hirsch not only reconstitutes an old dualism; he oversimplifies significant and unresolved issues in pedagogy. David Perkins, for instance, has long been interested in the relationship between teaching thinking in diverse contexts and teaching “stand-alone courses like science and mathematics as a way of moving people to learn to think better.” To teach subjects in that fashion, Perkins said in a recent interview, there has to be “much more consciousness of the kind of thinking that needs to be done and . . . much more engagement of the students in genuine problem-solving, genuine inventive tasks, genuine critical appraisal, and so on.” John Passmore, in his turn, spoke about the importance of developing “open capacities,” most particularly the “capacity to be a critical participant” within the great human traditions. R. S. Peters, even as he questioned the overemphasis on problem solving and critical thinking in Deweyan classrooms, nonetheless stressed the importance of initiating people “gradually into the procedures defining a discipline as well as into mastery of the established content.” There are differences among those concerned about teaching with regard to the weight to be placed on the transmission of content and on the criteria governing bodies of knowledge, but I can think of no serious scholar in the field willing to reconstitute the old either/or as E. D. Hirsch has done.

The reason for his particular approach appears to be his preoccupation, not solely with the transmission of bodies of knowledge, but with a return to those essentials he chooses (as other conservatives do) to identify with an objectively existent “adult culture.” He backs this up oddly by claiming, at one juncture, that Plato believed that “the specific contents transmitted to children are by far the most important elements of education” (p. xvi). Without presenting Plato’s argument, he takes a kind of leap and asserts that one of the good reasons for Plato’s concern for specific contents was ethical—“whether a person is to be good or bad.” When he then goes on to hold Rous-
seau and Dewey responsible for abandoning "the transmission of appropriate cultural information," he is by implication condemning them for the neglect of "character."

This places him very much in the school—or the "bully pulpit"—of Secretary of Education William Bennett, with his desire to "reclaim a legacy" and redeem the American character. With a similar inclination to look back on the past as if it were a golden age, Hirsch speaks of the common body of knowledge made available to American children in the 1890s, a proper core that somehow defined the nature of our culture. As he views it, that core was given official embodiment in the 1893 Report of the Committee of Ten with its prescriptions for a subject-oriented curriculum. He pays almost no attention to the fact that the 1890s predated the knowledge explosion and the increase in dissemination of knowledge that mark our century. More seriously, he neglects to say that half of America's children did not go to school at all in 1890 and were not privy to school knowledge (or the "background" it was to provide). More than 10 percent of the population was illiterate, and a relatively small minority attended the few high schools that existed. To identify a single-strand adult culture for a comparably elite minority is not a very difficult thing to do, even if the curriculum required were to be similar to that in the British grammar schools. Hirsch does recognize that great increases in immigration and an expanding student body marked the years just preceding the First World War. Instead of seeing the 1918 publication of the Cardinal Principles of Education as, at least in part, a response to unprecedented problems of mass education, he blames the shift from the subject-oriented curriculum on Dewey and the "formalists." He also blames a psychology marked by a "romantic" emphasis on individual differences and the Thorndikean rejection of transfer of training, especially where the teaching of Latin was concerned. Dewey (again) is made to bear the brunt of the responsibility for the "shift from subject matter to social adjustment" (p. 118). He is made responsible too for the ostensible stress on "utility and the direct application of knowledge, with the goal of producing good, productive, and happy citizens" (p. 118). Hirsch has nothing to say about Dewey's serious and long-standing concerns with regard to the public sphere in our democracy, nor about his linking of a democratic education to the formation of an "articulate public." The image of "happy citizens" seems to me to be a demeaning one and indicative of an underestimation of what is entailed by a commitment to public education in a diverse, continually changing society. Nor does Hirsch confront what Jane Roland Martin has called an "epistemological fallacy" that "fosters the illusion that curriculum can be determined without . . . asking questions about the good life and the good society," the kinds of questions that might lead to an integration of "thought and action, reason and emotion, education and life."

For all that, we cannot argue with the claim that young Americans do not share the range of cultural referents that might provide the understanding
and the cohesion many of us would like to see. They are not generally familiar with nor insightful about many aspects of the tradition in which they are embedded. They have little sense of history, little interpretive acquaintance with the canonical works that stud Western arts and humanities. Hirsch advises us not to seek for causes in the decline of the family, in social-class differences, or in television programming, since we can do little to affect structural and other reforms outside the school. We do have, he tells us, the capacity to do something to change curriculum, which is "the most important controllable influence on what our children know and don't know about our literate culture" (p. 20).

That may well be, but it does seem to me that he is ignoring a "curriculum" that is at least equally influential in many young people's lives. Whether we like it or not, television programs are providing and have provided a kind of common literacy and even a common culture. It has often been pointed out, for instance, that the civil rights movement would never have been as successful as it was were it not for television. Thousands of southerners were informed of their rights and the denial of those rights by means of television, even as they were given a sense of the part they were playing in American history. Further, as is well known, millions in other parts of the country were so educated by the sight of firehoses, police dogs, and the enactments of civil disobedience that they added their voices to the protests and caused the federal government to intervene. This is not to set aside the crassness, the commercialism, the manipulativeness of much television programming, nor the ethical confusions (as shown in the film Broadcast News). It is to insist, however, that audiences do indeed share a great deal of background information, far more than any previous generation, even if it is not what we desire; and many millions, no matter what the assessments say, belong to a national language community.

The implication, as I see it, is that we need to pay more attention than we have done to a critical television literacy, even as we work for initiation into what Hirsch describes as cultural literacy. He chooses to condemn formalism again, however, for the rise of the "shopping mall high school" and what he calls "cafeteria-style education," as if Dewey (his arch-formalist) had never himself called attention to similar problems. Dewey did so (in an essay called "Monastery, Bargain Counter, or Laboratory in Education?"12) in a vein quite different from Hirsch's. Hirsch associates all this with the fragmentation of what he conceives to be an "indispensable body of knowledge," indispensable for everyone. Dewey, equally aware of fragmentation, called for "a method of discovery through search, through inquiry, through testing, through observation and reflection— all processes requiring activity of mind rather than merely powers of absorption and reproduction" (p. 242). Hirsch admits Dewey's humaneness, but he persists to the end in asserting that educationists are polarized into "facts-people versus skills-people." He persists, in addition, in reminding his readers that Rousseau, Dewey, and their disci-
ples believed that facts deaden children's minds. Because they did, they made impossible any assurance that "a pattern of shared, vividly taught, and socially enabling knowledge" would emerge from instruction in our public schools (p. 133).

Again, I agree that there are large and unnecessary holes in children's knowledge structures, gaps in what Dewey called "the background of organized meanings" that can alone convert new situations "from the obscure into the clear and luminous." I agree as well that, even as we meet the challenge of an ever more pluralist society, all young people must be considered entitled to the kind of critical and cognitive education that will empower them to participate in the "national community." No one can seriously disagree that a concern for higher-order cognitive skills must be linked to a concern for subject matter; nor is anyone seriously proposing that skills be separated from "facts," if facts are the best we think we can transmit. If the proposal for cultural literacy, however, is to be acted on coherently by those committed to a democratic school, it ought to be detached from the discourse of contemporary conservatism. That discourse, it seems to me, is what moves this discussion so irresistibly toward essentialism and to the fabrication of straw men for an attack on "formalism." It is what moves it as well to the making of a kind of index, the listing that has made so many smile.

We people in education have serious and significant work to do if, in the midst of a consumerist society, we are going to move diverse young persons with diverse life-stories to learn how to learn. We have to face the disinterest of many members of the adult population in the very works Hirsch thinks every American should know. Some of the disinterest is due to the headlong rush for success; some of it is due to the difficulties experienced in maintaining and supporting families—in staying safe and alive. A good deal of it is due to a dominant technicism, a commitment to the technical, to knowing how rather than knowing why. And, yes, some of it is due to a teaching force that has not been liberally educated, that has not been privileged to have the joy of looking through disciplinary perspectives, of seeing the lived world from many vantage points, of connecting the felt and the imagined to the known.

Background knowledge—backgrounds of "organized meanings"—is needed; but multiple life-stories remain to be recognized, stories that may themselves be the source of such knowledge and such meanings. I believe we have to affirm and cherish that diversity, as we have to attend to multiplicity in our changing and plural world. We have to listen to the voices, the too often silenced voices, and work for their articulateness. We have to overcome passivity and carelessness, so that more and more people (from more and more places) can choose themselves as culturally and critically literate creators of as well as participants in a changing common world. There is no need for a return to dualism. There is no need for indices and trivial pursuits.
There is a need for the excitement of discovery and the spaciousness of rational perspectives. There is a need for the founding of new learning communities, for a reconceiving of education in democracy.

Notes
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