

## **Cultural Literacy in the New Millennium: Revisiting E.D. Hirsch**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper revisits the notion of “cultural literacy” as propounded by E.D. Hirsch in his 1987 book by tracing its evolution from previous educational theorists and philosophers to the publication of Hirsch’s book. It also explicates and examines the arguments for and against cultural literacy in respect to its rationale and implementation at schools throughout the United States. The author contends that the notion of cultural literacy is supported by research in reading and that its implementation could be successful if strategic negotiations take place at state, district, and even school levels in order to familiarize administrators and teachers with the scope and purposes of cultural literacy, which would be instrumental in American students’ success in the humanities and social sciences in k through 12 public schools and ultimately in higher education.*

The notion of “cultural literacy” was thrust to the forefront of educational parlance with the 1987 publication of E. D. Hirsch’s seminal book, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. The book’s appearance generated a furor in educational and academic circles and led to strident arguments on both sides of the socio-political aisle. Indeed, *Cultural Literacy* has become an iconic text and, regardless of one’s position in respect to the arguments advanced in the book, it has had its mark on both policy and practice in U.S. educational circles.

In the book as well as the subsequent filmed interview, Hirsch commences with the concept of literacy itself and contends that “literacy is more than just the actual mechanics of reading. Literacy means understanding what you read and to understand what you read you need to have the appropriate background knowledge.” (Core Knowledge Foundation, 1996 & 1993) He criticizes the formalistic theories of literacy that focus almost entirely on formal reading skills without paying much attention to the background knowledge or schema (plural: schemata) that students need to know before they can comprehend a given text. Hirsch’s main objective in the book is to define cultural literacy and to expound the core cultural knowledge that American students need to attain in order to function productively in the society, which he terms “core knowledge.” As such, this shared knowledge that is referred to as cultural schema, is in Hirsch’s view, indispensable to academic and professional success.

In his book *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch sets out to catalog and describe this core knowledge as a relatively limited body of information that can be listed and learned. He is emphatic that his purpose is not to create his own world view; rather, he intends to concentrate on “shared literate knowledge, 80 percent of which is over 100 years old.” (*Change*, p. 25) Hirsch attributes the decline in the American public education to lack of sufficient cultural literacy, which in turn, impacts the overall academic achievement of students throughout k through 12 public education system. Consequently, he concludes “that shared information is a necessary background to true literacy.” (Hirsch, 1987, p. 2) To illustrate his assertion in respect to schema research and American students’ insufficient socio-cultural knowledge, Hirsch cites seventeen and eighteen-year-old students in Richmond, Virginia, who were unable to comprehend reading passages of the American Civil War due to their lack of familiarity with Civil War commanders Ulysses Grant and Robert Lee! (Smith, 1994, p. 11) Hirsch cites this example to make his point that no matter how good the students may be in terms of the mastery of overall reading skills, they will not understand the text fully without possessing the requisite shared background knowledge.

Hirsch does not solely focus on substantive (i.e. content) knowledge; indeed, he advances the argument that both “procedural” and “substantive” knowledge are needed to comprehend a given text with some level of complexity. The procedural knowledge would be the overall reading skills that readers bring to the reading of a given text, whereas substantive knowledge is comprised of the content-based schemata, that is, the background information (cultural, historical, political, etc.) that would facilitate the reading process.

He notes that 80 percent of the items on his cultural literacy list are more than a hundred years old, which he deems as the “core,” while the remaining 20 percent are considered as “peripheral” and subject to change. Among the latter 20 percent are scientific and technological breakthroughs as well as new socio-cultural developments that find their way into the general public sphere. Smith (1994) describes the core knowledge “characterized not only by a certain vagueness but also by a national, as opposed to a merely local, scope and a fair amount of stability.” (p. 16) As Smith correctly observes, “Culturally literate people may not have detailed insight into what they read, but they are capable of getting the drift, gist, or general shape of things.” (p. 16) Thus, the cultural schemata make reading comprehension possible by providing a general network of socio-cultural associations. In his article entitled “A Long View of the Literacy Debate: E. D. Hirsch Jr. and His Forebears,” Richard J. Reynolds (2002) traces Hirsch’s arguments on cultural literacy to historian Arnold Toynbee. In his conclusion to Myers’ *Education in the Perspective of History*, Toynbee addresses the role of education in inculcating cultural heritage in students and the tremendous challenges that are posed in this process. Toynbee’s ideas are very similar to Hirsch’s since they both see the role of education as one of cultural transmission. As Reynolds notes, Toynbee’s “culture” is very close to Hirsch’s “core knowledge.” Furthermore, as Reynolds astutely observes, both theoreticians “make a plea for educational system to assume stewardship over this process of [cultural] transmission.” (p. 6)

Additionally, Reynolds (2002) cites John Amos Comenius, the Czech theologian and educator, as the pioneer who first came up with the notion of “a central core of knowledge to which all knowledge is added sequentially.” (p. 7) Comenius states the following in *The Great Didactic*:

The remedy for this want of a system is as follows: at the very commencement of their studies, boys should receive instruction in the first principles of general culture, that is to say, the subjects learned should be arranged in such a manner that the studies that come later introduce nothing new, but only expand the elements of knowledge that the boy has already mastered. (Quoted in Gross, pp. 22-39)

Thus, Reynolds (2002) convincingly argues that Toynbee, Comenius and Hirsch underscore shared, core knowledge, the “logical progression” of this disseminated knowledge, and its indispensable role in “the development of individuals as well as society.” (p. 7) Hirsch has had his critics some of whom have questioned the theoretical underpinnings of his core knowledge proposition as well as his conception of cultural literacy. One of these critics is Peter McLaren who is leery of Hirsch’s compilation of a core knowledge list that seems or claims to be “chastely utilitarian and serves to further what he sees as invidious power relationships.” (Reynolds 9) McLaren argues that the dominant culture usually “separates knowledge from the issue of power and treats it in an unabashedly technical manner; knowledge is seen in overwhelmingly instrumental terms as something to be mastered.” (McLaren 183) Those who espouse critical pedagogy would like to see the ideological aspects of knowledge construction “linked to particular interests and social relations,” which McLaren contends is missing from Hirsch’s core knowledge list (McLaren 9) Thus, McLaren’s main concern is that the core knowledge list that sanctions certain bits and pieces of cultural information may lead to the marginalization and disenfranchisement of the minority groups and/or “the furtherance of the existing social order” through the omission of the minorities’ history throughout the United States (McLaren 9)

In Hirsch’s view, however, minorities are marginalized and/or disenfranchised because of this very reason, that is, many of them are often not sufficiently familiar with the national, dominant culture. As a case in point, Jeff Smith cites and quotes Malcolm X’s self-education to illustrate and corroborate the seminal role that core cultural literacy plays in enabling individuals to participate in a democratic society: “With every succeeding page,” noted Malcolm X, “I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually, the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia.” (Quoted in Smith 18) Again Smith points out that “what’s most interesting is that in telling his story, Malcolm X gives as much credit to Herodotus, H. G. Wells, Will Durant, and Arnold Toynbee as to minority writers like Ghandi, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frederick Olmstead. He appears to have found all these writers inspiring.” (Quoted in Smith, 1994, p. 18) Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. was well-read and proficient in American history and his apt references and allusions to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution make his writings and speeches very effective. In his historic “I Have a Dream” speech, for instance, his references to the language and assertions made in the Declaration of Independence and how those promises had been denied to African Americans make it a very powerful sound bite. Thus, numerous historical cases of such individuals who rise up from among the minority groups and use their knowledge of the historical and cultural heritage to advance their agenda is testament to the crucial significance of core cultural literacy in the U.S. society, particularly to the minorities who may be marginalized due to a host of political and socio-cultural factors.

In "Cultural Literacy in Classroom Settings: Teachers and Students Adapt the Core Knowledge Curriculum," Johnson, Janisch and Morgan-Fleming report on a project in which a group of teachers in Texas developed and taught units based on Hirsch's "core knowledge curriculum." In their adoption of core cultural schemata, the teachers who participated in this project and who were advised by the education faculty at Texas Tech University, considered interest (students' and teacher's interest) an important factor in their deliberations and ultimately selected units on Shakespeare, colonial America, the Civil War, the Middle Ages, and the Aztec history with success in a school where the majority of students came from the minorities, that is, "65 percent were Hispanic, and 25 percent were African American." (p. 260) They were also flexible in terms of assessment and allowed their students a choice as to how to show their knowledge of the units taught. "The teachers were impressed with the content that their students engaged and with the sophistication of their oral and written expression." (p. 268) This study/project demonstrates and corroborates Hirsch's contention that cultural literacy can be successfully adopted and it does, in fact, enhance student knowledge and engagement, particularly minority and marginalized students, if it is adopted and incorporated into the curriculum in a sensible way that takes account of students' interest and motivation.

Hirsch also makes an important distinction between *extensive curriculum*, which is the domain of cultural literacy and *intensive curriculum* where topics and issues "are studied in greater depth and where more choice and flexibility are possible." (Smith, 1994, p. 26) Those who criticize Hirsch on grounds of superficiality and his focus on rote memorization seem not to have grasped the key distinction that Hirsch makes between the two types of curriculum since Hirsch is not stating that intensive curriculum is superfluous; what he is arguing, instead, is that both "extensive" and "intensive" curriculum are indispensable to students' attainment of a well-rounded education. While the former provides the general cultural framework (i.e. schemata), the latter allows for depth of understanding and sophistication in a more flexible and freer context by focusing on a set of specific texts. In fact, according to Hirsch, the twin curricula should be viewed as complementary rather than competitive or exclusive. Nonetheless, Hirsch's text *Cultural Literacy* focuses on the extensive curriculum and the cultural schemata because he intends to underscore the pivotal role that the background cultural knowledge plays and make a case for its incorporation into k-12 school curriculum. Furthermore, as Smith astutely notes, Hirsch does not argue that all the cultural schemata should be memorized; conversely, he contends that "The contents of cultural literacy should be integrated into lesson plans that are included in spellers, textbooks, dictionaries, and so on." (Smith, 1994, p. 27)

One of the strident criticisms leveled against Hirsch's notion of "cultural literacy" was enunciated by Aronowitz and Giroux (2003) who accused Hirsch of mounting "a new cultural offensive" by offering a conservative and elitist account of history and culture to the detriment of class and liberal politics (p. 26) They contend that Hirsch "attempts to enlist the language of culture and the culture of literacy as bases for rethinking the American past and reconstructing the discourse of public life." (p. 38) However, this is not Hirsch's intention; he believes that meaningful political and social engagement cannot take place without mastering or at least becoming familiar with the cultural and historical heritage, that is, cultural literacy, that will enable the participants to get involved and make contributions and/or effect change; as a case in point, Martin Luther King Jr. and his masterful knowledge of American history that made him such an articulate and engaging orator in the civil rights movement. Thus, Hirsch is on the minorities' side and, as Cook aptly states, "to be in a better position to engage productively in political discourse and join in the ongoing democratic conversation of the United States." (p. 487)

I concur with Hirsch in that first we need to internalize the basic, factual and cultural information, which in turn will enable us to analytically critique and analyze various cultural, historical, and political phenomena by looking at them in a more critical light. Hence, the mastery of cultural schemata should be viewed more as a starting point in socio-cultural engagement rather than an end point of cultural indoctrination. If the factual historical or cultural information is contested, however, then the different accounts of them should be incorporated into the curriculum and taught accordingly. Another criticism that Aronowitz and Giroux (2003) level against Hirsch and his version of cultural literacy is their contention that he espouses "cultural uniformity" at the expense of "cultural pluralism." However, what they fail to acknowledge is Hirsch's nuanced position, namely, that he simply objects to "unfettered pluralism in which each group exacts strict obedience to its own language and values." (Smith, 1994, p. 31) As previously noted, this allows for the common shared cultural knowledge that makes dialogue and socio-political engagement feasible. Thus, acculturation becomes the prerequisite to social and political engagement. Aronowitz and Giroux (2003) (also associate Hirsch's arguments with the policies of the Reagan administration; however, as Smith correctly observes, Hirsch's ideas were derived from the reading research in 1970's.

Moreover, Hirsch had been focused on the issue of reading and cultural literacy for quite some time prior to the publication of his *Cultural Literacy*. I also believe that Hirsch is correct in his concern for cultural fragmentation in the increasingly diverse American society and the need for the inculcation of a common core cultural knowledge that students from diverse backgrounds would learn that would make the socio-political dialogue and engagement possible among the various constituents. In “The Rhetoricity of Cultural Literacy,” Paul G. Cook (2009) advances two arguments in respect to Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy*: First, that “the *rhetoricity of Cultural Literacy* had a major effect on the book’s reception in that it tended to obscure the more engaging elements of Hirsch’s project.” (p. 488) In other words, certain aspects of the book such as the title as well as the book’s emphasis on the core cultural knowledge and especially the “provocative” extensive list of socio-historical bits and pieces of information made it appear prescriptive and endorsing the notion of the western canon, which is not really accurate. Second, Cook (2009) draws attention to “the pedagogical and rhetorical utility of the mechanism on which cultural literacy is predicated.” (p. 488) As noted earlier, Hirsch identifies educational formalism as propounded by Dewey and Rousseau at fault for the excessive focus on neutral skills in reading without paying much heed to the content and the shared cultural schemata that students need to know in order to make sense of various reading passages. Lazere (2009) concurs with Hirsch on the necessity of a twin focus on both the reading skills as well as the content.

As Hirsch correctly points out, “The polarization of educationists into facts-people versus skills-people has no basis in reason.” (p. 133) As he continues to expound the issue, the two camps should join forces in order to improve and enhance American students’ reading skills which have gone down over the years. In “Thumps Up on Hirsch, Thumbs Down on Bloom,” Lazere notes that by introducing the concept of “cultural literacy” Hirsch addressed the much needed issue of minimal cultural knowledge and censures the proponents of multiculturalism for failing to do so. “I have never heard doctrinaire advocates of multiculturalism and diversity address the question of what *is* the minimal level of common knowledge and reading material that is advantageous for Americans of all identities to have in common.” (*Pedagogy*, p. 502) My anecdotal observations over the last decade teaching English literature and composition at a number of colleges in Northern California corroborates Hirsch’s claim of the American students’ insufficient knowledge of American history and culture. I queried my students at both freshman and junior levels about very basic and well known statements and events in American history. Even though I suspected my freshmen not to be able to come up with the correct answers, I was surprised that the juniors did not fare much better either. For instance, only one student out of twenty could identify the speaker of “Give me liberty or give me death” or “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.” in my junior class!

In “Cultural Literacy and Testing: Content Assessment,” Ernest R. House takes issue with certain aspects of Hirsch’s characterization of cultural literacy; in particular, his list of cultural schemata that he deems as politically conservative. As previously noted, the list would be up for negotiation and alteration at the state levels and, in my estimation, should not be considered as the seminal factor in adopting or abandoning *cultural literacy*. Furthermore, the implementation of Hirsch’s list at the district and school levels would further modify the conservative aspect of it and probably render it as more centrist. Nonetheless, House agrees with Hirsch that “Teaching more cultural content in the schools is an attractive idea. The idea that current texts and materials are deficient from a humanities content perspective seems reasonable.” (pp. 58-59) House also likes Hirsch’s argument to do away with tracking in schools and endeavor to inculcate in all students the cultural content; nonetheless, House “would like to see a more active view of both culture and learning.” (p. 62) He contends that “Culture is constructed and produced by people in our view, and is subject to medication and revision.” (p. 62)

However, Hirsch’s endorsement of both “extensive” and “intensive” knowledge addresses this concern by allowing for both the internalization of general, factual knowledge as well as intensive and detailed knowledge that would allow for more in-depth analysis and complexity. House is also concerned about the utilization of multiple-choice tests that assess students’ superficial knowledge. Instead, he believes that essay tests which are geared toward assessing students’ intensive knowledge are more appropriate and that “multiple-choice, factual recall tests are not the best way to assess humanities content.” (p. 65) I would argue, however, that both types of assessment (e.g. multiple-choice and essay type tests) are needed since they assess different types of cultural knowledge at different levels of complexity. In fact, my observations in college level classes have repeatedly confirmed American students’ lack of familiarity with essential, factual historical information such as the timeline for the American Civil War, which in my view would necessitate the internalization of certain facts in American history and culture as necessary; hence, multiple-choice tests would be an appropriate way to assess the extensive factual information along with essays and other types of testing that would assess students’ intensive cultural knowledge.

One does not have to entirely adopt Hirsch's arguments; for example, it is feasible to agree with the notion of cultural literacy as an indispensable pedagogical tool while take issue with the extensive, core cultural list that Hirsch proposes in his book. In fact, the list of cultural bits and pieces of information to be incorporated into textbooks will hopefully be subject to negotiation in a sensible, participatory manner so that the teachers who would have to implement it will buy into it. Furthermore, as Hirsch has acknowledged, the list will have to be updated in order to reflect recent developments in socio-political, cultural and scientific/technological realms.

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