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Cultural Literacy and Teaching Composition

BENJAMIN G. LOCKERD, JR.

Since the truth about most great matters is both/and, an integration of two opposing principles, the educational controversy over skills and knowledge comes round and round again. E. D. Hirsch is one of the people bringing it back toward a greater emphasis on knowledge. He aims to stop at a point of balance, which is very difficult to do once one's ideas become a *movement* whose momentum is augmented by the energy of lesser minds. We will look at the issue from a saner perspective and have a greater chance of hitting the balance if we begin by noting that the balance has been struck, at least in theory, before now. If we turn the wheel of educational theory back a few turns, we find Cardinal Newman writing in *The Idea of a University*, "Memory is one of the first developed of the mental faculties; a boy's business when he goes to school is to learn, that is, to store up things in his memory. For some years his intellect is little more than an instrument for taking in facts, or a receptacle for storing them; he welcomes them as fast as they come to him..." (96). In Newman's view, this early capacity for memorization of facts prepares the student for a higher goal of education, enlightenment or "enlargement of the mind," to be achieved later: "There is no enlargement, unless there be a comparison of ideas one with another, as they come before the mind, and a systematizing of them" (101). His "enlargement" sounds very like what we now call "higher order thinking" or "critical thinking" or "intellectual skills." The notion that memorizing facts necessarily precedes the development of critical thinking goes at least as far back as Greek myth, in which Mnemosyne is known as the mother of the muses: all intellectual gifts flow from Memory. Hirsch states this integrative view succinctly: "Facts and skills are inseparable" (133). Like Cardinal Newman, he asserts that elementary-school children have a voracious appetite for factual knowledge and argues that critical thinking should be introduced later.

My fourth-grade daughter has been assigned a science textbook which apparently attempts to incorporate training in critical thinking skills, and she recently made her parents feel her own frustration by asking our help in answering the question "What is the difference between a rock and a mineral?" Given our experience of elementary education as memorizing correct answers, we told her to look up the answer in the chapter, but she finally convinced us that the answer was not *in* the chapter. We did some quick higher order reasoning and told her that minerals were the components

or parts of rocks, but we were left feeling uneasy. What happened to simply memorizing the types of rocks: igneous, metamorphic, sedimentary? Analyzing and systematizing might come later. This little incident left us feeling inclined to agree with Hirsch when he says that elementary school should be devoted to learning facts, in preparation for learning later how to order and interpret knowledge.

Scientists studying the mind have identified at least two different types of long-term memory, located in different parts of the brain. So-called “declarative memory” stores facts — names and numbers. “Procedural memory” stores knowledge of processes or skills — how to drive a nail or ride a bike, or write a history paper (Alper 33-36). Our current version of the perennial debate adopts these terms: we ask which part of the brain to work on when. I take it that Hirsch is speaking of this mental division of labor when he speaks of “procedural and substantive schemata,” and I take it he is quite right when he maintains that thinking draws on both at once: “All cognitive skills depend on procedural and substantive schemata that are highly specific to the task at hand” (60-61). Riding a bike probably draws almost exclusively on procedural memory; writing a history paper draws on both types of memory at once. Advocates of “the basics” (which usually seems to mean the three R’s) and advocates of critical thinking both tend to emphasize procedural knowledge (or skills) instead of substantive, factual knowledge.

Hirsch’s approach, though it focuses primarily on reading ability, has powerful implications for the teaching of writing. Writing, he maintains, is no more separable from background knowledge than reading: we have to write *about* something. Hirsch points to an 1893 report on education which came out before educators became infected with Dewey’s ideas and which recommended a core curriculum with emphasis on the integration of various disciplines, as well as the integration of skills and content. Hirsch writes,

All sections of the 1893 report stressed the importance of integrating the contents of the subjects. It was emphatic, for instance, in holding that English composition should not be conceived as a skill in isolation from subject matter, and in one passage it explicitly rejected what I have called educational formalism in English. (117).

By “educational formalism” he means the idea that students can be taught to perform certain operations regardless of the subject matter at hand. Hirsch at one point dubs the critical thinking movement “the latest version of educational formalism.” English composition courses have indeed tended to teach writing without reference

to the subject of the writing, and that is the problem I am addressing here. One of the biggest frustrations our Freshman Composition students have is that they do not have enough to say. We can work effectively with them on the processes writers use to develop their ideas, but we do keep coming up against a sheer lack of substantive knowledge (“ignorance,” some of us have been known ungraciously to term it) in our student writers. On most subjects of importance, they really do not have enough to say. When one of my students writes that “in areas of poverty there are many poor people,” is he simply unaware of the logician’s procedural rule against circular arguments, or is he going in circles because he is writing about something he has no knowledge of?

Also shocking to teachers of basic writing skills courses (as we call composition courses at Grand Valley) is the revelation (now generally accepted) that intellectual skills are not readily transferable from one type of task to another — context is everything. Opponents of the old faculty psychology, which spoke of training the mind, making it fit for general thinking tasks, have long pointed out that skill in Latin does not automatically translate into, say, skill in algebra. Hirsch points to experiments with chess players which showed that chess masters could memorize the positions of chessmen in a game after glancing at the board for just a few seconds but found it as difficult as beginners did to memorize positions of chess pieces placed randomly on the board. Chess masters do not have a general facility at fixing spatial relations in their minds: they are good at spotting typical “schemata” of chess games. Such experiments call into question the idea that we can teach our composition students how to write well in general and then expect them to be able to write well in all their later courses, whether they be history, chemistry, or literature. A colleague who teaches his physical chemistry students to write good reports complains to me, “At first I have to retrain them so they will stop writing the rambling, illogical things you English teachers have trained them to do.”

The course commonly called English Composition or Freshman Composition in colleges and universities around the country is by definition an intellectual skills development course rather than a content course. The traditional approach has used a writing handbook, a rhetoric, and a reader. The handbook explains the subtleties of English grammar and usage (the “basics”); the rhetoric describes stylistic strategies (higher order skills); the reader gives examples of good writing for the students to analyze stylistically and to imitate in their own compositions. Even the reader has been used more to develop skills than as subject matter. The topics for student writing tend to be cur-

rent events issues, and the students concentrate on mastering certain rhetorical modes that are used in all types of writing: narration, description, example, process analysis, cause and effect analysis, definition. Obviously, this is a formalist approach.

More recently, many composition instructors have shifted their emphasis away from such texts and toward working intensively with the students' own writing at every stage. The teacher introduces the student to the thinking process that good writers use: generating ideas, drafting, revision, getting responses from others, rethinking, revising again. In this approach the emphasis has shifted even further away from content or subject matter, as the stress on "process" — procedural knowledge — indicates. Profs of this school tend to eschew readers and encourage students to write about something they are already experts in, their own experience. This method acknowledges that writers must write about a particular subject and that they must have extensive substantive knowledge of that subject. When the subject is autobiographical, as it is in our English 106 course, the students may claim that their lives are boring, but they cannot claim that they have nothing to say. And it is fairly easy to get them to find out what is interesting in the crises and triumphs of the most normal life. Our course seems to succeed in getting the students to think of themselves as writers, people who do have something to say. Unfortunately, many of these writers go on to do rather poorly in their later courses, where they are required to write about topics largely outside their immediate experience. The procedural knowledge and confidence we have instilled in them simply do not carry over to writing assignments which demand that they draw upon their cultural literacy.

It seems to me that when we adopt this process-oriented approach using autobiographical topics we are falling into the philosophical pit Hirsch finds beneath most twentieth-century educational theory — a pit dug by Jean Jacques Rousseau: "Even today, Rousseau's principles reappear in the doctrine, straight from *Emile*, that a child's positive self-concept is the true key to learning" (119). The beginning of our comp. course seeks to build students' self-assurance as writers. We press them to fill their descriptions of their lives with concrete details, and those details, however ordinary, automatically lend interest to the writing, so that we can then exclaim happily over it. But the concrete details we expect to find in most types of college writing are to a large extent the names and dates and phrases and concepts in Hirsch's list. Our students go on to courses in which both their substantive and procedural knowledge are inadequate to the writing tasks they are given.

Hirsch quotes Roland S. Barth, who adopted the romanticism of Dewey and Rous-

seau when he wrote in 1970, “In a real sense children’s own experiences are the subject matter — the content of learning” (125). Just such a gushy rejection of cultural values in favor of individualism lies behind courses like ours, I am afraid — as if we belonged to the Leo Buscaglia school of education. It may still be that we do need to begin with autobiographical writing, but we must accept the challenge to increase students’ cultural literacy in every class, so as to help them make the leap to expository writing.

With either the traditional rhetorical approach or the new process approach, we keep coming up against the reality that one does not write just to write. A writer always has a subject. Moreover, a writer has a genre in mind, a certain type of writing that the reader will recognize. This type of writing will adhere to the unwritten rules of a particular discipline, especially if it is presented within an academic setting. A series of conferences on critical thinking held at the University of Chicago has increasingly emphasized the importance of these generic and disciplinary assumptions. The successful writer shows with every sentence familiarity with those procedural assumptions. Hirsch presses us to realize that among the givens of any disciplinary discourse are also substantive assumptions, the items of cultural knowledge essential to that field of study. Good writers, even when they do write about current issues or their own experience, do so using the vocabulary of that rich heritage.

Without suggesting we abolish the methods developed by generations of teachers in both the old school and the new school of writing instruction, I wish to propose a greater emphasis on content in the English Composition course. In fact, goodly numbers of instructors have been moving in this direction, probably for longer than I know. With such instructors, English Comp. becomes something like an introduction to the central academic disciplines, as well as to the facts of cultural literacy.

The text I, along with many other instructors, have used is Lee Jacobus’ *A World of Ideas* (Saint Martin’s Press). Professor Jacobus divides the reader into sections on political theory (with readings from Machiavelli, Rousseau himself, Jefferson, Marx, Frederick Douglass, Thoreau, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Martin Luther King), economics (Smith, Malthus, Veblen, Galbraith), psychology (Freud, Jung, Karen Horney, Skinner), science (Bacon, Darwin, C. P. Snow, George Wald, Thomas Kuhn, Stephen Jay Gould), philosophy (Plato, Locke, Russell, Weil, Tillich), and art or aesthetics (Aristotle, Santayana, Woolf, Langer, Sontag). One could argue for inclusion of other disciplines, but this does give good representation to the humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences. Each section presents essays which give the students beginning

familiarity with some of the really important thinkers, terms, and issues of each field — most to be found, of course, on Hirsch’s list. The student essays are in response to those writers. Curiously, the famous thinkers included in Jacobus’ text are not always great writers. E. B. White (whose work is included in practically every normal comp. anthology) is a much more fluent, more artistic writer than Freud or Smith, or most of them. The emphasis in a text like Jacobus’s is squarely on ideas rather than on style.

Naturally our students find reading Marx and Darwin and Aristotle extremely challenging. A big part of the challenge is the vocabulary, and it is an important part of their learning because the difficult vocabulary includes many of the important concepts of our culture. In teaching these difficult texts, I emphasize to the students what I believe is true, that the ideas of the great thinkers are not particularly *complex*: in fact, their genius often lies in their elegant simplicity. The ideas are strikingly original, profound, and powerful, but in one way they can be reduced to a list such as the one Hirsch and his colleagues are making. My students are frequently offended when I give objective exams (nearly unheard of in comp. classes) in which they must recognize passages from our text and identify them with the authors’ names, which they must have *memorized*. (This last requirement seems utterly gratuitous to some, since I could so easily put the names at the top of the page and thereby save them from having to do completely useless and irrelevant rote memorization.) They end up coming to these tests with a little list of names every college student ought to know stored in their memories.

When they learn some of the key names and terms of intellectual history, students begin to write differently. They still have to work on some very basic skills, but a certain sophistication begins to appear in some of their writing. That sophistication results in large part from their increasing ability to introduce the essential names and terminology to a discussion, indicating their awareness of at least part of the cultural context built up around a particular issue.

Of course, at the college level cultural literacy should go beyond name-dropping, and in the better papers it does. One of the best I have received shows the influence of both Locke and Darwin on Skinner’s theory of behavior and talks about the general tendency toward materialistic assumptions in modern thought. The less profound thinkers struggle with the big ideas, but they sometimes accost me in the halls in later semesters to tell me “We’ve just been talking about Freud in my psychology class” — or Darwin in biology, or Marx in economics or political science. These students are enjoying the feeling of being culturally literate and are presumably better able to

enter the discussion in those classes.

Ideally, if Hirsch is right, students could come to college with a high level of cultural literacy already gained from what he calls an “extensive curriculum,” and we would be able to offer more specialized courses in an “intensive curriculum.” If this vision were achieved, I suppose we would not teach either general education courses or English Composition courses at college. We will need to continue teaching these courses for the foreseeable future, but Hirsch’s perspective should alter our practices. In general education, we should insist that whatever curriculum we come up with include much of the terminology basic to our culture. In Freshman Composition we should help our students learn to read and write about the key ideas contained in each division of that cultural vocabulary.

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