1-1-1988

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

Dominique Olree

*Grand Valley State University*

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol3/iss2/16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
BOOK REVIEW


E. D. Hirsch, English professor at the University of Virginia, in his book Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know, builds a case that states emphatically that Americans are culturally illiterate due to the educational dogma adhered to in the last fifty years. Our schools, he suggests, fail to acculturate children to the American cultural patterns and, therefore, produce ineffective communicators. The lack of a common vocabulary, he insists, has produced a nation fragmented in commonalities: there is a lack of the same information being taught in the schools, he retorts to educators, and this produces a society devoid of shared background information; without such, one can not effectively communicate ideas or pass on to future generations our culture.

Hirsch cites various examples to support his concept of an illiterate nation. His surveys reveal a population that is unable to place the time of the Civil War or even World War II! A pre-law student at the University of California believed Toronto to be a town in Italy. A number of respondents logically assumed that Latin was not a dead language, as “Latin Americans must speak the language.” Only two students out of a hundred could even approximately identify Thomas Jefferson. These findings, of course, are startling!

Indeed, Hirsch’s basic argument is palpable: successful understanding of a passage read depends on what experiences the reader brings to it. This idea is not new; for over twenty years researchers have been saying that a well-developed schema, i.e., everything one knows about a subject, accounts for at least 50% of what one comprehends from reading. For example, one cannot fully understand a story about flying if in fact one’s experiential background does not include knowledge about airplanes, airports, and flying. Frank Smith of Harvard University in his book Reading Without Nonsense (1978), supports this idea: “Readers must bring meanings to what they read, employing their prior knowledge of the topic and the language of the text.” Patrick Finn, who wrote Helping Children Learn to Read (1969), states:

Much recent research in comprehension has dealt with schema theory. Experience teaches more than simple isolated facts. The human mind perceives relationships between facts and imposes order on information. Soon one uses structures based on previously determined relationships in per-
ceiving and making sense of new experiences. These structures are called schemata. Comprehension depends on the schemata the reader possesses.

As many recent studies have shown, reading scores obtained from students across the nation are far lower than would be expected in a nation where education has such a high value. Lack of common knowledge certainly is one of the causes for this problem. Hirsch does an exemplary job of pointing this out to his readers.

For Hirsch the solution is as obvious as the problem: return to a traditional program like that of the one-room schoolhouse. He does not advocate standardized textbooks and lessons, but he does recommend that educators agree on an index of information every citizen needs to know, and then teach it no matter what educational format they use. The “Titanic”, for example, could be encountered in a history lesson or in a short story, but no American ought to leave school without encountering it somewhere. In order to draw up a comprehensive index—"the list", as Hirsch calls it—he collaborated with a mathematician and a historian. This list fills the last sixty-three pages of this text and constitutes vocabulary words and phrases from “abolitionism” to “youth will have its fling.”

“60 Minutes” has exposed the ignorance of the typical college student. The public has decided it disapproves of teachers who know less than their students. Hirsch’s proposal addresses a real problem. His curriculum of cultural information would appear to be an improvement over what is now taught. The question which appears to this writer is not will we get something like Hirsch’s proposal, but what will happen when it comes?

One danger which immediately becomes apparent is the memorization of lists of words. As Vacca and Vacca state in Content Area Reading (1986) “...words are labels for concepts, a single concept represents much more than the meaning of a single word. It might take thousands of words to explain a concept.” They also state that “...students must develop contextual and conceptual knowledge of words in order to comprehend freely what they read.” Although Hirsch is careful to insist that his items of cultural information must be presented in appealing, intelligent contexts, the temptation to produce a classroom version of Trivial Pursuit will surely be too strong for all educators and publishers to resist, especially with Hirsch’s suggestion of exit tests for fifth, eighth, and twelfth graders.

If, as Hirsch says, children are “storing facts in their minds everyday with astonishing voracity,” it is also true that they are selective. To claim that American students are ignorant because they are badly taught is a half-truth; they are also ignorant by choice. Hirsch himself provides ample evidence. A Los Angeles man claims that “...in
years of working with teenagers he has yet to find one who could tell him when World War II was fought.” Is it not likely some teenagers have run into this information and didn’t store it “with astonishing voracity”? Students do not want to know the dates of World War II.

Hirsch includes a host of proverbs in his index: “Ignorance is bliss,” “Easy come, easy go,” and “A little learning is a dangerous thing.” Hirsch might make the young learn aphorisms of this kind, but what will he do if they believe them as well? A culture may share information, but it lives by its beliefs. Hirsch’s book has nothing to say about these beliefs—and how could he, since many of them are antagonistic to the whole understanding of cultural literacy?

Dominique Olree