

E.D. Hirsch and the Teaching of History

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Some History teachers care very little about facts. These teachers live under the banner of 21st century skills. They believe that students don't need to learn as many basic facts anymore because Google can give them all of the facts they need. They argue that students should mainly focus on learning the skills that can help them be better students and citizens. This tendency to deemphasize factual learning, which has been around far longer in than the 21st century skills movement, is what the author E.D. Hirsch has vigorously attacked since the publication of his book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* in 1987. Hirsch's argument has a lot of merit and should be read by every teacher of History. While his position on education is by no means flawless, it can help to temper movements in education that put too little emphasis on the learning of foundation information.

For Hirsch the learning of culture is very important. Our shared, national culture creates and sustains the United States of America, and it is through the educational systems that our culture is transmitted to the diverse people of our country. Learning culture is Hirsch's answer to increased academic skills and broad social justice.

In *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch parallels the formation on national language to the formation of national cultures. In each case there is a mixture of the intentional and arbitrary spheres of influence (*Cultural Literacy* 70-82). The formation of the English language is an example that Hirsch uses to illustrate his point. Many grammatical rules in English were set in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by intellectuals that "agitated to purify and ascertain the language in dictionaries and grammars" (*Cultural Literacy* 78). The rules that developed weren't always logical, but their importance lies in the fact that they became standard and "will probably stand forever" (*Cultural Literacy* 80). Hirsch also argues that even though national written languages are somewhat artificial, it "shouldn't make us misconceive them as purely artificial constructs like Esperanto. They are living organisms"

(*Cultural Literacy* 82). Therefore, language, like culture, is shaped by the natural processes of human contact combined with the intentional actions of people.

Hirsch connects the process of national written language to national culture. Just like language, national culture “also transcends dialect, region, and social class and is partly a conscious construct” (*Cultural Literacy* 83). Hirsch points to Mason Weems’s fictional story about George Washington and the cherry tree as an example of this function. Even though the story is erroneous, it can trace its lasting influence “to human universality rather than conscious political design” (*Cultural Literacy* 89). The George Washington story, even after being debunked, found its way into the textbooks. Hirsch argues that traditions like this become solidified in our “national memory...[and that] events become fixed by constant usage, just as spellings do” (*Cultural Literacy* 90). Therefore, like rules for grammar or spelling, dictionaries of cultural literacy are a powerful force to “help outsiders enter mainstream literate culture” (*Cultural Literacy* 91). They form that basis of what we share as Americans and they are entrenched in how we understand and talk about our country.

Hirsch breaks culture into three realms as a way to narrow down the important areas of cultural literacy. These realms are civic religion, culture proper, and national vocabulary (*Cultural Literacy* 103). Culture proper represents the “concrete politics, customs, technologies, and legends that define and determine our current attitudes and actions and our institutions” (*Cultural Literacy* 103). In his view, culture proper is in a constant state of change. Therefore, our civic religion, our set-in-stone shared American values, and the national vocabulary, our value-neutral definitions, are what we need to be concerned about. He asserts that we can’t effectively communicate to change our culture proper until we share a common and “widely shared” national vocabulary (*Cultural Literacy* 103).

For Hirsch cultural literacy is the basis of communication, which is also the key to all vital life skills. In his chapter from *Cultural Literacy* titled “Skill as Knowledge and Knowledge as Skill,” Hirsch cites

research on schemata and its influences on the ability to read and understand. Basically, if a student doesn't have adequate background knowledge they will not be able to understand language. Schemata is both process of "storing knowledge in retrievable form...[and]...organizing knowledge in more and more efficient ways, so that it can be applied rapidly and efficiently" (*Cultural Literacy* 56). Hirsch sums up this idea by drawing a comparison between poorly educated people and children. "Both are ineffective because of cognitive overload. A semiliterate person reading or a young child describing strange shapes has to figure out too many things at one time" (*Cultural Literacy* 68). Hence, cultural literacy is the most important part of education. One might argue that these skills aren't necessarily tied to other skills; however, Hirsch argues that "[e]ven if linguistic skills are not identified with other competencies, they are prerequisites for them" (*The Schools We Need* 146). This is the main driving force behind Hirsch's philosophy. To execute complex skills a person needs to communicate effectively and a person cannot communicate effectively until he or she is knowledgeable of the dominant, shared culture of the nation.

It is exactly access to this mainstream culture that Hirsch believes is vital to social justice. A person without cultural literacy is a person without agency, a person that has less ability to communicate and critically think with precision. Hirsch illustrates this very strongly by pointing out the language used in *The Black Panther*, a publication of the revolutionary civil rights group in the early 1970s (*Cultural Literacy* 22-23). Though *The Black Panther* was pushing to change society, it "was highly conservative in its language and culture assumptions, as it had to be in order to communicate more effectively" (*Cultural Literacy* 22). This ability to communicate is the great gateway to push for important change. It is also how complex academic tasks, like critical thinking, can be completed.

Hirsch's idea on literacy is important for History teachers to understand and acknowledge. His stance on the importance of cultural literacy to reading is consistent with modern research in the field of

neuroscience. Research has shown that reading is not a naturally acquired skill, and that vocabulary, which can be understood as cultural literacy in Hirsch's point of view, is vitally important to comprehension (Sousa 183-185). Reading is so difficult that only half of students gain reading smoothly, "[f]or the other 50 percent, reading is a much more formidable task, and for about 20 to 30 percent, it definitely becomes the most difficult cognitive task they will ever undertake in their lives" (Sousa 185). This lends credence to Hirsch's claim that the naturalistic approach to reading is wrong. Likewise, to learn reading it has been suggested that vocabulary needs to be strong and students need to be able to accurately know cultural ideas because "[m]any English words have dozens of meanings, depending on their context. Thus, developing the ability to quickly block irrelevant meanings comes necessary for reading fluency and comprehension" (Sousa 187). Hirsch's idea about cultural literacy and reading comprehension is probably the most important part of his approach. An article critical of Hirsch had to admit that even though they disagreed on the scale of his argument, they did concede that "cultural knowledge helps one interpret the social world" (House, Emmer, and Lawrence 61). It is hard to deny this part of cultural literacy.

However, while one can readily admit the importance of cultural literacy, Hirsch goes too far to make his whole program practical for the deep learning he wants to impart. Some of Hirsch's critics have claimed that his program promotes purely rote learning (House, Emmer, and Lawrence 73). This is not completely in line with what he suggests, though one can see how a person could reasonably be led to this conclusion. His list of cultural literacy is perhaps very extensive. If a person tried to teach the whole canon, it might lead to purely rote methods. Anyone who knows a teacher of A.P. History has heard that this can happen when a curriculum becomes too extensive. However, Hirsch does not advocate for purely teacher-led rote methodology. He believes that cultural literacy should be taught through varied methods. He writes that,

“The classroom observations of Stevenson and his colleagues bring home the ancient wisdom of integrating both direct and indirect methods, including inquiry learning, which encourages students to think for themselves, and direct informing, which is sometimes that most effective and efficient mode of securing knowledge and skill. A combination of show and tell, omitting neither, is generally the most effective approach in teaching, as it is in writing and speaking” (*The Schools We Need* 173-174).

Hirsch wants the teacher to lead through “guided instruction” but he also believes that other, more student-centered methods are needed as well (*The Schools We Need* 173). Unfortunately, Hirsch believes too much in direct instruction. Research shows that direct instruction is not very effective and that the more active the learning, the better the information is retained (Sousa 95). How can students truly become literate if the bulk of the method used is not effective in the long run? It’s hard to argue against the fact that cultural literacy can increase overall reading ability. However, it is also hard to deny that Hirsch’s methods for teaching this literacy are weak and not very practical.

Defining cultural literacy is problematic as well. Hirsch states that the terms included on the list are fluid and can change. Some terms are so common they shouldn’t be included and some are “specialized” enough to warrant their place on the list. Some terms are too new to be on the list and some are too old to make their inclusion useful anymore (*Cultural Literacy* 138). Culture is shared much more rapidly than it was in 1987. Is compiling and updating this list even possible anymore? Is it as useful? Should we simplify the list to major concepts related to American civic religion? Added to the problem of compiling the list, a compelling argument can be made that the list is very politically motivated. In Hirsch’s 1988 paperback edition of *Cultural Literacy* “a number of controversial political figures and terms were removed, as well as terms referring to human reproduction” (House, Emmer,

and Lawrence 70). Is the list really neutral or is it intended to subtly promote conservative values? The very hazy nature of Hirsch's list is puzzling and saps the overall strength of his ideology.

A teacher of History would do well to recognize the vital importance of some major widely shared cultural terms; however, one should only take Hirsch's approach in small doses and with great discernment. There are some terms that every American should know. We should all recognize the Constitution. We should be familiar with the Bill of Rights. We should know about many presidents, eras, and social movements. Many of these terms would probably fall into what Hirsch calls our civic religion. These are what we should commit to automatic memory and have ready to use. Other terms are good to know, but we shouldn't sacrifice useful learning opportunities for their sake. A toned-down version of cultural literacy would fit the needs of active learning while at the same time giving students the important cultural capital that would better enable them to improve their academic skills. It is convenient that the internet can provide us with a vast wealth of information today. However, computers cannot replace our conscious thought. People should actively create their own understandings, and we as teachers should help create at least a basic national language to help shape the consciousness of our nation.

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