

Cultural Literacy in the 21st Century

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Abstract

E.D. Hirsch's curricular concept of "cultural literacy," first popularized in his 1987 book *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, has had quite an interesting history in the more than three and half decades since that book's release. Since day one, cultural literacy has been consistently controversial, but where it has been tried, it has produced results in improving reading comprehension, and no contrary studies seem to contradict that. Currently, the ubiquitous Common Core State Standards serve as a practical stand-in for cultural literacy, as the debate over Hirsch's work seems to discourage some from studying it, much less using it by name. Sadly, results of that endeavor are hard to quantify, as its actual implementation has been spotty. As we continue to refine what and how we teach in the 21st century, we might do well to accept the value of Hirsch's ideas and focus on discussing precisely what content we should be teaching together, and how.

Keywords: cultural literacy, E.D. Hirsch, curriculum, Core Knowledge, Common Core

Introduction

It has been over 35 years since E.D. Hirsch published his landmark bestseller *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. Hirsch's work was immediately a hot item of controversy on both sides of the partisan aisle, with the right claiming it as a prop to their own ideology and the left calling it a tool of perpetuating inequity. Over the decades, those battle lines have remained fairly stable.

Still, as two entire generations have been through the primary and secondary school systems since 1987, Hirsch's ideas have been not only criticized and debated, but also actually implemented. Regardless of political zeal or scorn, what have been the effects of a focus on cultural literacy? Have Hirsch's claims about his signature work been vindicated, or disproved, or have there been unexpected results altogether?

Has the concept of cultural literacy always been implemented in the same ways, or has it evolved over time? What value, if any, does cultural literacy have as we continue to refine our methods and content for the 21st century?

Hirsch originally defined cultural literacy as “the whole system of widely shared information and associations” needed to function in America by understanding idioms and references in normal communication (Hirsch, 1987, p. 103). That novel definition has remained largely stable, even being adopted by his colleagues; in a tribute to Hirsch’s career decades later, Chester Finn and Michael Petrilli wrote:

“Teaching knowledge is teaching reading—and reading will never be mastered beyond the ‘decoding’ stage without a solid foundation of knowledge. Children cannot be truly literate without knowing about the world—about history, science, art, music, literature, civics, geography, and more is not a value statement about what students ‘should’ study; rather, it reflects decades of cognitive science and reading research. Once children learn to decode the words on a page, greater literacy is attained only through greater knowledge. Reading comprehension, and thus learning by reading, depends on knowing something about the content of the passage at hand.” (Finn & Petrilli, 2014, p. 2)

Bernard Schweizer is a college professor who used to disregard Hirsch’s cultural literacy claims, but who now embraces them, wrote of seeing the effects of cultural illiteracy in his classes, then notes the connection, obvious to him, between cultural literacy and social mobility:

“Absent a serious re-evaluation of cultural literacy, I’m afraid, we’ll end up in a society where a large part of the people will only know how to talk to their immediate in-group in a stripped-down, simplified argot. This will seal them off from most opportunities open to those members of society who command a more solid grasp of shared cultural knowledge.” (2009, pp. 55-56)

Schweizer shares a concern that Hirsch originally expressed, namely, that cultural literacy is not a means of perpetuating a status quo, but of empowering any and all students to flourish fully in the public world:

“The benefit could be very great indeed—the achievement of significantly greater social and economic equity [...] The reforms are meant to raise the reading levels of all students and to break the cycle of illiteracy that persists from parent to child under our current school curriculum.” (Hirsch, 1987, pp. 143-144)

Still, despite the apparently reasonable nature of Hirsch’s claims, strong opposition remains, and it remains in largely the same terms in which it has been expressed since the mid 1980’s. Consider this critique from 2020:

“‘Powerful knowledge’ and ‘cultural literacy’ dominate education and education policy[...] Approaches based on ‘powerful knowledge’ in the study of literature cannot address the student's own experience of literature, crucial for the discipline, nor the values which orient any understanding of literature, nor the central role of critical judgement.” (Eaglestone, p. 5)

It doesn’t sound much different from this criticism leveled back in 1991:

“Critically literate readers must learn to distinguish the sources of the concepts they use to make inferences and most importantly must understand the logic of those concepts [...] Hirsch seems oblivious of this essential insight, of this necessary discipline.” (Paul, pp. 531-532)

Even aside from the polemical skirmishes of the education cohorts, an interest in the concept of cultural literacy is no doubt strong in our country in general; consider, for example, the trend of videos claiming to reveal the ignorance of the young or the “common man on the street.” The point of such “gotcha” sidewalk interviews is to laugh at some stranger’s alleged lack of cultural literacy. Though such humor segments go back at least as far as Jay Leno’s tenure as host of *The Tonight Show*, even within the past few years one YouTuber has had multiple viral videos with this format: a 2022 video titled “INSANE: Young Americans Don’t Know ANYTHING!” garnered 3.8 million views (Fleccas Talks). Obviously, there is a significant segment of society that values the concept of cultural literacy.

Appraising Cultural Literacy: Success or Failure?

Therefore, after three and a half decades of argument and experiment, with public interest in the concept still running high, what can evidence tell us about the value of Hirsch’s cultural literacy curriculum?

One study of the validity of Hirsch’s claims for cultural literacy curricula was performed by applying a 115-item cultural literacy test to 1,343 community college students, presenting data that “supports the validity of the CLT and the general construct of cultural literacy” (Pentony, 2001, p. 95), concluding with this: “It has been illustrated in this study an research by others (Pentony, 1992, 1996, 1997) that students who are culturally illiterate do not do as well in courses that require reading as students who express cultural literacy. Students and others who are culturally illiterate, and therefore do not read as well, should be identified and helped as soon as possible” (Pentony, 2001, p. 96).

That was just one of ten studies correlated by the Core Knowledge Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by Hirsch in 1986 to advance the work of cultural literacy, to provide a holistic overview of “research showing that Core Knowledge can help lift student scores and close the gap between the more and less disadvantaged students” (Core Knowledge Foundation, 2004, p. 1).

A more recent reappraisal of Hirsch, using a survey of research results, came to similar conclusions about the basic validity of cultural literacy as a useful pedagogical concept:

“[...] 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.” (Shamshayooadeh, 2011, p. 275)

Shamshayooadeh not only supports the essential ethos of Hirsch’s work, but even takes educators in a practical direction for optimal implementation!

One looks in vain for any studies showing the inclusion of cultural literacy in an ELA curriculum to be unhelpful at all, much less detrimental. Indeed, nary such a study is to be found at all, much less a body of work such as that which Hirsch’s Core Knowledge Foundation trumpets. Why this dearth of literature on the subject, especially if cultural literacy curricula is as manifestly bad as its critics assert?

Paul G. Cook theorized that the animosity was largely borne of a misperception that Hirsch’s work was proscriptive rather than descriptive, that critics were not seeing the pragmatic skill set forest here for the apparently didactic trees: “However, these critiques indicate a recurring critical emphasis on the latter part of Hirsch’s project, what I call the *what* of cultural literacy, as opposed to the *how*” (Cook, 2009, p. 489) and “What Hirsch advocates as cultural literacy is not docile enculturation in some monolithic, stable knowledge-entity but is something like a heuristic for rhetorical invention that stresses the relevance of being merely familiar with certain cultural *doxai*, opinions, attitudes, or values” (Cook, 2009, p. 493).

Ironically, even when some scholars criticize Hirsch, they end up essentially agreeing with him and repeating his ideas. In “Knowledge, Literacy, and the Common Core,” Cervetti and Hiebert endeavor to promote a knowledge rich curriculum but hasten to add that “although we refer to knowledge or information, we are not referring to discrete factual knowledge. The kinds of knowledge that have the potential to support reading comprehension and generally enrich students’ lives cannot be reduced to a list of facts, as has occurred in some interpretations of knowledge building” (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015, p. 257), then name checking Hirsch. As an example of what they mean, they later cite a study showing that young readers exhibited better comprehension of passages about the Vietnam War if they “were provided with knowledge pre-training” (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015, p. 259). It should be noted that Hirsch’s *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* has an entry about the Vietnam War (Hirsch, 2002, p. 778).

Cervetti and Hiebert also mention that “writers, especially writers of complex texts, assume their readers will be able to fill in gaps and make connections [...] writers assume that readers will draw on a schema related to the topic and, using this schema, will use relevant knowledge” (Cervetti and Hiebert, 2015, pp. 258-259). This echoes

something that Hirsch himself said in the book that Cervetti and Hiebert are contending against:

“Knowing about prototypes is essential for understanding how we apply past knowledge to the comprehension of speech [...] We are able to make our present experiences take on meaning by assimilating them to prototypes formed from our past experiences... Researchers who have been relating these mental entities to reading, particularly R.C. Anderson and his associates have chosen the word schema for them.” (Hirsch, 1987, p. 51)

Still, Cervetti and Hiebert make an interesting and useful point, even if their dismissal of Hirsch is flawed. They say, “In line with the CCSS, we mean the kinds of disciplinary understandings that support reading and learning within content areas. We use the term *knowledge* because it is the term selected by the CCSS to represent discipline-relevant learning and also because much of the relevant research uses this term” (Cervetti & Hiebert, 2015, p. 257). Perhaps they see Hirsch as privileging a body of content area literacy, where they want to focus more on disciplinary literacy. If so, they are part of a welcome and wider conversation about the flexible nature of what constitutes the material to be promulgated to the next generation; as Schweizer said,

“I am certainly in favor of debate regarding what needs to be covered in a shared national curriculum. There’s no doubt about the need to negotiate what should be included under the heading of ‘the great tradition,’ the canon, and all the rest. But while we should be mindful about the limiting effects of every defined body of knowledge, let us not throw out the baby of a modern education with the bathwater of cultural literacy [...] How local, popular, and ethnic forms of knowledge can co-exist with a more formal kind of cultural literacy is the real question, not whether or not cultural literacy has a place in national education.” (Schweitzer, 2009, p. 56)

Even researchers whose work supports Hirsch’s conclusions voice this reservation about Hirsch’s notorious list: “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” (Shamshayooadeh, 2011, p. 277).

Indeed, Hirsch himself said much the same thing in his original work: “DNA and quarks, now part of cultural literacy, were unknown in 1945. In short, terms that literate people know in the 1980s are different from those they knew in 1945, and forty years hence the literate culture will again be different” (Hirsch, 1987, p. 29).

One could note that it has now been thirty-six years since that statement was made and, indeed, the cultural landscape has changed a great deal. Perhaps an updated concept of cultural literacy would remove potentially obsolete references like Johnny Appleseed or the Pony Express, and add more recent fodder for allusions, like Lin-Manuel Miranda’s musical *Hamilton*, the Covid-19 pandemic, or “doom scrolling” social media.

Preliminary efforts in that direction have already been made. In a reevaluation of Hirsch’s work, Eric Liu wrote:

“For one thing, the list for our times can’t be the work of one person or even one small team. It has to be everyone’s work. It has to be an online, crowd-sourced, organic document that never stops changing, whose entries are added or pruned, elevated or demoted, according to the wisdom of the network.

“Everyone should make his or her own list online. We can aggregate all the lists. And from that vast welter of preferences will emerge, without any single person calling it so, a prioritized list of ‘what every American needs to know.’” (Liu, 2015, p. 61)

Thereafter, Liu presents an ad hoc update including such new material as “whiteness,” “nativism,” and “DARPA” (Liu, 2015, p. 62).

Cultural Literacy Persists Under Other Names, But Ambiguity Endures

Since some researchers appear reluctant to mention Hirsch at all, much less agree with him, there is another way to measure the effectiveness of his ideas. In an essay for a volume in honor of his career, Hirsch noted that he is a big fan of a recent innovation whose worldview bears an uncanny resemblance to that of cultural literacy: Common Core. “When I’m asked if I support the new Common Core State Standards (CCSS), I give an emphatic ‘yes.’ They constitute the first multi-state plan to give substance and coherence to what is taught in the public schools. They encourage the systematic development of knowledge in K–5. They break the craven silence about the critical importance of specific content in the early grades” (Hirsch, 2014, p. 80). With its emphasis on a universal curriculum reflecting America’s distinct zeitgeist, Common Core may be the best realization of cultural literacy to date.

Thus, Common Core can be a surrogate for cultural literacy in the 21st century. If we want to see how successful a cultural literacy curriculum is, we can assess the merits of Common Core. For example, one study of how the federal writing standards have been integrated into classroom instruction championed ideas very similar to Hirsch’s, without ever using the name “Hirsch” or the term “cultural literacy.” Mo et al. noted how “students in most grades are expected to attend to topical information or subject matter when they write and to provide elaborative details that illustrate, illuminate, extend, or embellish general content” (Mo, 2014, p. 449). They likewise mention that “students are expected to master the structural elements and information that are canonical to the narrative genre (e.g., plot, dialogue, setting, characters) in third grade and beyond...”, then recommending “text models” of genre details (Mo, 2014, p. 450), all of which is essentially synonymous with aspects of cultural literacy.

Even here, though, in what may seem a fairly clear cut area for analysis, are detours and cautions. For one, Hirsch is skittish about the high-stakes testing component of how Common Core has been implemented:

“So far, I am leery of both sets of official tests for the Common Core, at least in English language arts (ELA). They could endanger the promise of the Common Core. In recent years, the promise of NCLB was vitiated when test prep for

reading-comprehension tests usurped the teaching of science, literature, history, civics, and the arts—the very subjects needed for good reading comprehension.

“Previously, I wrote that if students learned science, literature, history, civics, and the arts, they would do very well on the new Common Core reading tests—whatever those tests turned out to be. To my distress, many teachers commented that no, they were still going to do test prep, as any sensible teacher should, because their job and income depended on their students’ scores on the reading tests.” (Hirsch, 2014, p. 82)

Hirsch is far from alone in this hesitation about what may be a dangerous downside to his approach to schooling, though some who also worry about high stakes testing seem to be equally concerned about how it might include the concept of cultural literacy itself:

“Despite the transformative changes underway, federal and state mandates, including high stakes testing, have caused many English teachers to focus more intensely on what some call ‘the basics.’ In other words, teachers of secondary English need to account for the dramatically changing contemporary realities in the textual landscapes of their students, but at the same time they also need to attend to expectations that their classrooms will deliver instruction in ‘common culture’ texts that have been canonized in the secondary curriculum and in the disciplinary apparatus.” (Lewis, 2011, p. 77)

Failure to give cultural literacy curricula a shot is one thing, but a newer difficulty in measuring its value has been the struggle to fully implement the similar Common Core standards adequately, despite their formal adoption in the vast majority of states. For example, Tortorelli et al. found a disturbing lack of actual usage of the Common Core writing standards in a way that reflected the balance and priorities of those imperatives:

“The early learning standards across states varied considerably in how well they aligned with the Common Core for the early elementary grades (K–2). Early childhood standards rarely asked young children to create their own texts, whereas the Common Core includes expectations for composing in multiple genres. Early learning standards provided little guidance for comprehensive writing instruction that integrates writing skills across domains, and indicated potential misalignment in how writing is conceptualized and taught in preschool and elementary contexts.” (Tortorelli, 2021, p. 729).

If writing standards are so haphazardly applied as recently as 2022, we could reasonably worry about the quality of classroom Common Core instruction in other, cultural literacy-related areas of the English Language Arts, as well. This puts something of a damper on the researcher who would investigate the efficacy of Hirsch’s ideas in general across America. Thus, then, we might see cultural literacy as the pedagogic equivalent of religion, akin to G. K. Chesterton’s famous quip: “The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting, but that it has been found difficult and left untried” (Chesterton, 1910, p. 48).

Conclusion

This survey finds that cultural literacy has been useful...when and where it has actually been tried, and could continue to be so, depending on the context and quality of implementation, whether as “cultural literacy,” “powerful knowledge,” or “Common Core.” As 21st century literacy certainly demands a mastery of judicious critical thinking about sources and curricular materials at all times, this may be more of a feature than a bug. Our classes will contain some manner of cultural content. What factual information our students learn will depend not just on what checklist of nouns we accumulate, but also on how we teach them to become discerning evaluators of what matters most. Ultimately, students replace their teachers, so it is in our best interest to engage them in the discussions that we’ve been having for decades now: what do young people most need to know, and how do we best instill that knowledge in them?

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