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AUTHOR Hirsch, E. D., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Adult literacy is more than a condition of acquiring a set number of linguistic skills. Persons may know phonics and be able to decode simple readings perfectly; they may even know the meaning of many vocabulary words, but they still may be culturally illiterate. Cultural literacy demands more than mere linguistic skills; it demands participation in and knowledge about a shared body of knowledge, a knowledge of the culture of the country. Knowledge of this body of ideas and history is assumed by writers of everything from training manuals to newspapers, yet many adults do not possess this knowledge. At present, teaching this information is not easy, because there is no national consensus on what the shared body of knowledge, the shared cultural background, should contain. Therefore, raising the level of adult literacy requires more than money and teaching skills. It requires decisive leadership that will define what every adult should know so the information can be taught. When the cultural content is determined, when we have decided what a citizen has to know to be literate in the 1980s, then adult literacy, "cultural literacy," can be achieved. (KC)

Cultural Literacy

by

E. D. Hirsch, Jr.
Professor of English
University of Virginia

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Ladies and gentlemen, I want to suggest that literacy in a meaningful sense requires cultural literacy, a term that will become clear if I describe a recent experience of mine.

A few years ago I was conducting some experiments at the University of Virginia to measure the effectiveness of a piece of writing when it is read by real audiences under controlled conditions. Our readers in the experiment (who were mainly university students) performed just as we expected them to, as long as we kept the reading topics simple and familiar. But one memorable day we transferred our experiments from university students to students at a community college, and my complacency about adult literacy was forever shattered. This community college, I should add was located in Richmond, Virginia, and you will grasp the irony of the location in a moment. Our first experiments went well, because we started out by giving the community college students a paper to read on the topic of "friendship." When they were reading about friendship, these students showed themselves, on average, to be just as literate as university students. This evidence showed that, based on reading skills like speed, word recognition, and accurate recall, the university and community college groups were equally literate. But that changed with the next piece of writing that we asked the community college students to read. It was a comparison of the characters of Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee, and the

students' performance on that task was, to be blunt about it, illiterate. Our results showed that Grant and Lee were simply not familiar names to these young adults in the capital of the Confederacy.

Shortly after having that disorienting experience, I discovered that Professor Richard Anderson of the Center for Reading Research in Urbana, Illinois, and other researchers in psycholinguistics throughout the world had reached some firm conclusions about the importance of background knowledge in reading. For instance, in one experiment Anderson and his colleagues discovered that an otherwise literate audience in India could not properly read a simple text about an American wedding. But by the same token, an otherwise literate audience in America could not properly read a simple text about an Indian wedding. Why not? It wasn't a matter of vocabulary, or phonics or word recognition; it was a matter of background knowledge, of <u>cultural</u> literacy. Anderson and others have shown that to read a text with understanding one needs to have the background knowledge that the author has tacitly assumed the reader to have. Back in the 18th century, when mass literacy was beginning to be a reality in Great Britain, Dr. Johnson invoked a personage whom he called "the common reader" as the possessor of the background knowledge that a writer can tacitly assume readers in the larger culture to have. Similarly, in present day America, the common reader needs to have what I am calling "cultural literacy," in order to read general materials with understanding. Research has shown that this background knowledge is a fundamental requirement for meaningful literacy.

To give you an example of the need for cultural literacy, I shall quote a snippet from The Washington Post of a few weeks ago:

> A federal appeals panel today upheld an order barring foreclosure on a Missouri farm, saying that U.S. Agriculture Secretary John R. Block has reneged on his responsibilities to some debt ridden farmers. The appeals panel directed the USDA to create a system of processing loan deferments and of publicizing them as it said Congress had intended. The panel said that it is the responsibility of the agriculture secretary to carry out this intent "not as a private banker, but as a public broker." (December 29, 1983, p.A-13.)

Imagine that item being read by persons who have been trained in phonics and so on, but are as culturally illiterate as were my community college students. They might know words like "foreclosure," but they would not understand the text as a whole. Who gave the order that the federal panel upheld? What is a federal appeals panel? Even if culturally illiterate readers bothered to look up individual words, they would not have much idea of the reality being referred to. Nor, in reading other texts elsewhere, would they understand references to such things as, say, "the equal protection clause," or "Robert E. Lee," no matter how well they could read a text on friendship. But a truly literate American does understand references to "the equal protection of the laws" and "Robert E. Lee," and newspaper reports like the one I just quoted. For, as a practical matter,

newspaper reporters, and writers of books cannot possibly provide detailed background information on every occasion. Think, if they did, how much added information would be needed even in the short item that I quoted from the Washington Post. Every sentence would need a dozen sentences of explanation! And each of those sentences would need a dozen more.

Thomas Jefferson said that he would prefer newspapers without government to government without newspapers. He thought that the very concept of American democracy, depending as it does on all citizens having a vote, requires an informed citizenry, and universal literacy. He thought that literate, well-informed citizens will be able, more often than not, to make decisions in their collective best interest. On Jefferson's principles, we might venture this definition of the background information that an American citizen ought to have in order to be truly literate: It is "the background information required to read serious American newspapers and magazines with understanding." This knowledge would include not only political, and proverbial, and historical but also scientific information as part of the general background knowledge that I am calling "cultural literacy."

One reason that we as a nation have hesitated to make a collective decision about the background knowledge that Americans should know is that we object to such decisions being dictated to us from on high. We govern our schools through more than twenty thousand independent school districts, each of which decides or fails to decide such matters for itself, and which imposes or fails to impose its decisions on students and teachers. But despite this diversity in our schools, there is nonetheless an

unstated body of information that is assumed by writers of books, magazines, training manuals, and newspapers. These writers do have an idea of what their audiences can be expected to know. They assume, they must assume, a "common reader" who knows the things that are known by other literate persons in the culture.

But to an illiterate adult who is unaware of what literate persons are expected to know, such assumptions by writers could be regarded as a conspiracy of the literate against the illiterate, for the purpose of keeping them out of the club. Although newspaper reporters, writers of books, and the framers of the Verbal SAT test necessarily make assumptions about the things that literate persons should know, no one ever announces what that body of information is. So, although we Americans object to pronouncements from on high about what we should know, writers and other people in influential positions necessarily assume that there is a body of information which literate people do know. And this creates a kind of silent dictating from on high about the things adults should know in order to be truly literate.

Some decades ago there appeared in Britain a charming book called 1066 and All That. It dealt with facts of British history that had been learned by every British schoolchild, but which had become scrambled and confused in the adult mind. The book was hilarious to Britons, because their memories were not quite as vague and scrambled as the versions of history presented in the book. These Britons knew all too well that their school knowledge had become vague with the passage of time, but, of course, this forgetting of minor details didn't make them less literate than

they had been as children. Background information of the sort that is needed for true literacy is neither detailed nor expert information, though it is accurate in its outlines.

For instance, to understand the Washington Post snippet that I quoted, literate readers would know in the backs of their minds that the American legal system allows a judgment at a lower level to be reversed at a higher level. They would know that a judge can tell the U. S. Government what it can or cannot do to farmers and other citizens. They would know what and where Missouri is. They would know how the Department and Secretary of Agriculture fit into the scheme of things. And they would know a lot more that is relevant. But none of this knowledge would have to be highly detailed. They wouldn't need to know, for instance, whether an appeals panel is the final level before The Supreme Court. Readers need to share a cloudy but, on the whole, true sense of the realities that are being referred to in a piece of writing.

Let me briefly place what I have been saying in a historical perspective. What I have described as the core knowledge that is required for adult literacy in the United States is our modern version of what anthropologists call "acculturation into the tribe." In earlier, pre-Gutenberg days, acculturation into society was accomplished locally by word of mouth. Later, in the 18th century, with the modern nation-state rising fast, reading and writing in the national language began to be taught throughout Europe more widely and vigorously than ever before. Indeed, a modern national state could not exist without a standardized national written language, and compulsory schooling

in a literate national culture. All modern nations have depended upon this common linguistic and cultural core based on a national written language. Such apparent exceptions to this principle as Switzerland and Belgium are small countries where multilingualism has been carefully counterbalanced by intensive educational systems, which insure shared knowledge and a high level of biliteracy, which is to be carefully distinguished from so-called "bilingualism." The effective functioning of every modern nation depends upon a national literate culture associated with a national written language.

In our own country, Noah Webster's language publications starting in 1783 and culminating in the great American Dictionary of the English Langage of 1828, were declarations of cultural and linguistic independence that reflected our independent nationhood. Webster was the George Washington of American literacy; his American Spelling Book alone sold 60 million copies before 1890. He was shrewdly conscious of the connections between language-making, culture-making, and nation-making. Because of Webster, and other educators who thought as he did, the teaching of literacy in America was, early on, a repository not only of our national language, but also of national traditions, facts, and values. These connections that Webster drew between shared language, shared knowledge, and nationhood were understood not just by Webster, but by Herman Melville, and William McGuffey, and by many, many others. These educational leaders recognized that our dependence upon the national schools was even greater in this large heterogeneous land than in the nations of Europe. Under the leadership of educators like

McGuffey, and Baker, and Thorndike, our schools acculturated young people into the sort of shared literate culture that alone enables citizens of modern nations to communicate with each other, live together peacefully, and work together productively.

In contrast to this early American practice of imparting nationally shared traditions along with instruction in reading and writing, we encounter the more recent practice of teaching literacy as a set of technical skills. There is enough truth in the idea that literacy is a set of transferable skills to make such educational formalism a respectable, if inadequate, theory to hold. But it should be added that in recent times this skills-approach has also been a safe theory to hold. Specialists in reading and writing who adopt the skills-approach needn't commit themselves to any particular contents or values, except the values of so-called "pluralism." They can present themselves as technicians who remain above the cultural battle. This posture of neutral expertness is nowhere better illustrated than in the official curriculum guides of certain states (for instance, the state of California) which mention, do these so-called "curriculum guides," no specific contents at all. In earlier days, American educators carefully combined the technical skills of reading and writing with background knowledge, that is to say, with the acculturative side of literacy teaching. But in our own day, after fifty years of the skills-approach, and despite the advances we have made in reading research and in educating the disadvantaged, we find a decline in SAT scores and an apparent increase in cultural fragmentation.

We all know that our continuing failure to achieve a high

level of national literacy insures a continuing lack of subtlety in the communications that we can transmit widely in speeches, books and newspapers by means of the national language. Even a training maunual, for instance, can be much more effective and functional if it can assume a readership that is culturally literate. Moreover, we know that a low standard of literacy debases not only the level of general culture, but also the level of political discussion, and of technical and economic effectiveness. We know that a great deal is at stake in raising the level of national literacy.

So, in conclusion, let me restate my main point. Raising the level of adult literacy beyond the elementary level is not just a matter of raising the level of linguistic skills. Adult literacy is less a system of skills than a system of information. What chiefly counts in higher reading competence is the amount of relevant prior knowledge that readers have. This is not a mere ideological sentiment on behalf of a shared national culture, but a firm empirical truth about literacy that coincides with more general findings about the importance of specific knowledge in the acquisition of all higher skills. This means that adult literacy is a problem that requires decisive leadership at least as much as it requires money. Our illiterate citizens simply do not know the essential background facts and the essential words that represent them. Our schools have not imparted these essential facts and words, because in recent times we have not been willing as a nation to decide what the essential facts and words are. Despite our virtues of diversity and pluralism, our failure to decide upon the core content of cultural literacy has created a positive barrier to

adult literacy in this country, and thus a barrier to full citizenship and to full acculturation into our society. The time has come for Americans to be decisive and explicit and specific about the background information that a citizen should know in order to be literate in the 1980s. If we were to act decisively to define cultural literacy, then adult literacy would rise as a matter of course.