

◆◆ Chapter 32

Critical and Cultural Literacy: Where E. D. Hirsch Goes Wrong

Abstract

In this paper, originally a talk at the Montclair State College Conference on Critical Thinking: Focus on Social and Cultural Enquiry (1989), Richard Paul critiques E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy. Paul points out several problems with Hirsch's view, primarily that it is based on a didactic theory of education, and so depends on our giving students information to retain, and that what students need most is the ability to think clearly and fairlymindedly.

◆ *Hirsch on Cultural Literacy*

The term 'cultural literacy' has been popularized by E. D. Hirsch in a book of the same name. It's subtitle is "What Every American Needs to Know". The basic argument of the book is simple. Indeed, it is well characterized in the dust jacket of the hard cover edition as a "manifesto". Hirsch's call to arms is not addressed to the workers of the world but rather to the educators of the world, or, more accurately, *American* educators. Hirsch argues that there is a discrete, relatively small body of specific information possessed by all literate Americans and that this information is the foundation not only of American culture but also the key to literacy and education. Hirsch reasons as follows. Because there is a "descriptive list of the information actually possessed by literate Americans" (xiv), and because "all human communities are founded upon specific shared information" (xv) and because "shared culture requires transmission of specific information to children" (xxvii), it follows that "the basic goal of education in a human community is acculturation". (xvi) Furthermore, because,

Books and newspapers assume a 'common reader', that is, a person who knows the things known by other literate persons in the culture, Any reader who doesn't possess the knowledge assumed in a piece he or she reads will in fact be illiterate with respect to that particular piece of writing. (p. 13)

In his reasoning, Hirsch links the having of a discrete body of information not only with learning to read but also with becoming educated and indeed with achieving success. ("To be culturally literate is to possess the basic information

needed to thrive in the modern world.”) (xiii) Hirsch plays down the need for critical thinking and emphasizes instead that the information needed for cultural literacy does not have to be deeply understood:

The superficiality of the knowledge we need for reading and writing may be unwelcome news to those who deplore superficial learning and praise critical thinking over mere information. (p. 15)

The culturally literate, according to Hirsch, often possess common cultural content in a way that is “telegraphic, vague, and limited”. (p. 26) Those concerned with critical thinking, on the other hand, Hirsch alleges, are exclusively concerned with “abstract skills” and unconcerned with “cultural content”. (p. 27) Yet, he claims, it is precisely this finite quantity of “cultural content” that empowers students to read, write, and achieve success. In Hirsch’s mind, therefore, it is a mistake to criticize rote learning:

Our current distaste for memorization is more pious than realistic. At an early age when their memories are most retentive, children have an almost instinctive urge to learn specific tribal traditions. At that age they seem to be fascinated by catalogues of information and are eager to master the materials that authenticate their membership in adult society. (p. 30)

The result is that Hirsch believes himself to have discovered the “key to all other fundamental improvements in American education”, (p. 2) and “the only sure avenue of opportunity for disadvantaged children”, (xiii) “traditional literate knowledge”, “the information attitudes, and assumptions that literate Americans share” (p. 127) which, if transmitted to students, — even superficially — will make them culturally literate. Once educators recognize these facts, Hirsch confidently believes that “a straight-forward plan” to reform education can be set out. In this plan educators would set aside “abstract formalism” and the ill-conceived focus on critical thinking, “abstract skills”, and carry out instead three tasks: 1) “reach an accord about the contents of the national vocabulary and a good sequence for presenting it”, (p. 141) 2) “shift the reading materials used in kindergarten through eighth grade to a much stronger base in factual information and traditional lore”, (p. 140) and 3) “develop general knowledge tests for three different stages of schooling”. (p. 143) These simple steps, Hirsch holds, will ensure that all citizens will become not only culturally literate readers but autonomous persons as well:

It should energize people to learn that only a few hundred pages of information stand between the literate and the illiterate, between dependence and autonomy. (p. 143)

◆ *What’s Wrong with Hirsch’s View*

There are many problems with Hirsch’s reasoning. In the first place, it is simplistic. It suffers from the same faults as all panaceas, all attempts to reduce the complex and multi-faceted to the simple and uncomplicated.

Reading, culture, and education are more profound than they appear in Hirsch's neat and tidy world. There are many more distinctions to be drawn than Hirsch entertains and many of the concepts which he analyzes superficially need a more refined, a more precise analysis. To understand how to help students become empowered readers and autonomous persons who thrive in the modern world, we must lay our foundations more carefully and deeply than Hirsch suggests. We must draw careful distinctions and come to terms with complexities which he ignores.

1) *We must take care to distinguish possessing information from having knowledge.* Hirsch uses the terms 'information' and 'knowledge' synonymously throughout his book. Yet "information" may be false, biased, incomplete, or misleading while the word 'knowledge', in contrast, implies solid epistemic grounding. If I *know* something, I do not merely *believe* it. I grasp the evidence or reasons that account for or make intuitive its truth. 'False information' is intelligible. 'False knowledge' is not. As educators, therefore, we cannot be satisfied to merely transmit information. We must be concerned with how students receive and internalize information — if knowledge is an important end of education. As educators we want students to learn how to gain *genuine* knowledge, not simply what is commonly accepted as such. We do not want our students to become informational blotters, open to the manipulation of propagandists. We want them to learn how to question what is presented as the truth. We want them to routinely look for reasons and evidence to support, qualify, or refute what others simply accept uncritically and we want them to *understand* what they learn. This point can be put another way. There are significant differences between the processes of indoctrination, socialization, training, and education. These words should not be used synonymously. Yet apparently Hirsch sees no reason to distinguish them. He recognizes, as far as I can see, no contradiction in the sentence "Jane is very well educated with only one proviso: she cannot think for herself."

2) *We must recognize the complexity of society and culture and the extent to which they are necessarily a central point of intellectual and social debate.* Since both society and culture, whatever their character, are dynamic, and different groups have an interest in how they evolve and change, these same groups have an interest in how their history is told.

A conservative's account of society and culture differs from a liberal's account. Conservatives play up what liberals play down. Liberals play up what conservatives play down. Often the difference is less a disagreement about what happened, than about whether this or that happening should be included in the account at all. Moreover, after the problem of inclusion is settled, further problems arise regarding how much space to give an event, how it should be characterized, and what we should learn from it. Conservatives often emphasize how past practice is worth preserving; liberals often emphasize how it should be corrected or transformed. These opposing construals have implications for our analysis of social problems and issues.

Much depends on whether one defines culture in terms of articulated ideals (however little they were practiced) or in terms of living practices (however

distant from the ideal). So when Hirsch says that "We (Americans) believe in altruism and self-help, in equality, freedom, truth telling, and respect for the national law", (p. 99) his statement is ambiguous. He does not say whether he refers to articulated ideals or living practices. And when he says,

Besides these vague principles, American culture fosters such myths about itself as its practicality, ingenuity, inventiveness, and independent-mindedness, its connection with the frontier, and its beneficence in the world (even when its leaders do not always follow beneficent policies). (p. 98)

one does not know what status we should give to the term 'myths'. If it is part of our cultural tradition to foster false beliefs about ourselves, then it is odd to consider this dimension of our culture as a manifestation of our belief in "truth telling". Or is belief in our truth telling itself a myth to be transmitted? If so, is it to be transmitted *as a myth*? It is unclear how this dimension of our culture should be "transmitted" to the young. Hirsch tries to side-step this issue by arguing that our national culture is not coherent and therefore,

What counts in the sphere of public discourse is simply being able to use the language of culture in order to communicate *any* point of view effectively. (p. 103)

What he fails to take into account is that *how we pass on our culture* shapes what *our culture is*. If we pass on our culture so that the young uncritically accept myths as facts, then we cultivate uncritical thinking and uncritical conformity as part of our culture. If, however, we pass on our culture so that students must face the challenge of defining our culture, so that students hear and have to respond to alternative conceptualizations of our culture, then we cultivate critical thinking and independence of thought as part of our culture. These differing approaches to one's understanding of culture and its continuity have implications for our understanding of the process of cultural literacy as manifested in reading.

3) *Reading as a mode of cultural literacy is intrinsically a mode of critically questioning what one reads.* Hirsch repeatedly shows that reading is intrinsically a mode of thinking:

The reader's mind is constantly inferring meanings that are not directly stated by the words of a text but are nonetheless part of its essential content. The explicit meanings of a piece of writing are the tip of an iceberg of meaning; the larger part lies below the surface of the text and is composed of the reader's own relevant knowledge. (p. 34)

Unfortunately, Hirsch understands this process of inference to be fundamentally an uncritical or robotic process, a process that relies on "telegraphic, vague, and limited" meanings and associations. The issue, as I see it, is not "Does the extraction or construction of meaning depend on inferences based on prior knowledge?" The issue is "How does the *good* reader extract or construct meanings through inference?" Hirsch appears to forget that the information we use to construct meanings are of multiple types, some (when

misused in reading) lead us to distort or misconstrue the text. Reading a text is analogous to interpreting a situation. And remember we often construct interpretations as a result of our prejudices, biases, hates, fears, stereotypes, caricatures, self-delusions, and narrowmindedness. Our experience is not then less inferential. The poor reader makes inferences just as much as the good reader. The biased person makes inferences just as much as the relatively unbiased person does. Both reading texts and interpreting situations require insight into the multiple ways we can *mis-read* and *misinterpret*.

Reading is not a good in itself but only as it contributes to our understanding, only as it enriches us, enabling us to see things more truly, more faithfully. By the same token, experience is not a good in itself. Better no experience of a person or culture than a highly distorted experience of that person or culture. If reading and interpretation are to contribute to our education, they must reflect an emerging disciplining of mind and therefore of the mind's inferences. To do this requires a lot more than information that is "telegraphic" or "vague". It requires what might be called, for want of a better term, *critical literacy*.

4) *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.* The critically literate reader routinely distinguishes cultural association from empirical facts, data from interpretations, evidence from conclusions, believing from knowing, having convictions from being stubborn, having judgment from being judgmental, conversation from gossip, mastery from domination.

If in a text the word 'democracy' appears, critically literate readers do not ramble through a panoply of cultural associations, such as images of Democratic and Republican conventions, balloons, ads on T.V., apple pie, motherhood, our government, Abraham Lincoln, Instead they probe the conceptual essence of the word 'democracy:' "the people govern". One constructs legitimate paraphrases of the word, such as "a form of government in which political power is in the hands of the people collectively rather than concentrated in the hands of a few". One recognizes that it stands in contrast to oligarchy, monarchy, and plutocracy. One achieves, in other words, command of what the word implies to educated speakers of the English language. One distinguishes educated uses of the word from uneducated or culturally narrowminded uses.

For example, in the U.S. careless speakers often assume a necessary semantic relationship between the word 'democracy' and the word 'capitalism' or 'free enterprise'. They assume that a particular economic system — a market economy — is part of the very meaning of the word 'democratic'. With this culturally biased conceptual assumption they pre-judge a variety of empirical issues.

Critically literate persons continually distinguish undisciplined and often misleading cultural associations from educated use. The word 'love' does not imply to educated speakers of the English language what it implies in Hollywood movies and soap operas. It takes intellectual discipline for speakers of a language to free themselves from the domination of the cultural associations

that surround a word or phrase and grasp the trans-cultural meaning inherent in educated use. We tend to forget, for example, that there are educated speakers of English in virtually every country of the world and that the educated use of English, and all other natural languages, is not a simple reflection of the culturally dominant images and associations of any given culture that happens to use it. Learning to speak and write educated English does not presuppose U.S. or British or Australian or New Zealand cultural conditioning.

Hirsch seems oblivious of this essential insight, of this necessary discipline. He never mentions how an uncritical following of a cultural association that flies in the face of educated usage can cause a reader to misconstrue a text.

5) *Background logic, not background knowledge, is the crucial element to reading for understanding.* All writing that purports to convey knowledge or insight is structured by ideas and concepts in some logical relationships to each other. There are four dimensions of background logic that the educated, critical reader can probe: 1) the source of the ideas or concepts, 2) the sub-structure of the ideas or concepts, 3) the implications or consequences of the ideas or concepts, and 4) the relationships of the ideas to other ideas, similar and different. Since to read we must use our own thinking to figure out another's thought, critical readers form hypotheses about the author's possible meanings by trying out models from their own thought and experience. What could be meant, what is being implied by this or that sentence? If this is implied how does that square with what appears to be implied in the next and the next sentence? Let's see, could this or that experience of mine be what the author has in mind? If so, then he or she will also imply or assume this. Does he or she? Let me look further in the text.

One begins with the assumption that writers are logical and consistent. One begins with the most charitable interpretation of what they are saying, trying to come up with the strongest most insightful construal consistent with the text. One takes on the author's standpoint imaginatively and empathically. One tries to reason from the author's assumptions. One looks for evidence and experience to support what the author is saying. Only when one cannot find such evidence and support does a critical reader entertain the possibility that the text may be flawed conceptually or empirically.

This mode of critical reading was delineated many years ago by Mortimer Adler in his excellent book, *How to Read a Book*. In it he emphasizes how disciplined critical readers can figure out the basic logic of a text even when they don't have much of the background knowledge that would make it easier to read. This analytic process was used in the circle of people who read the Great Books of the Western World without the technical background in each book's field — psychology, philosophy, economics, physics, Armed with good dictionaries and the conceptual resources of their own minds thousands of dedicated readers sloughed their way through culturally diverse texts with minimal background knowledge. What they did is similar to what I did when I spent three days reading technical articles in medical journals at the U.C. Medical School Library to help a family member evaluate the status of

research on his medical problem. I had virtually none of the background knowledge of the typical readers (doctors), but I did know how to use a dictionary and the resources of my own mind.

With effort and struggle and some conceptual puzzlement, I was able to identify three distinguishable therapeutic approaches to the medical problem I was researching. I was also able to identify arguments that advocates of each were using in support of their own and in opposition to the other proposed treatments. I was then able to hold my own in subsequent discussions with medical proponents of those approaches. This ability to determine the basic logic of a text in the absence of the standard background knowledge of those it was written for is one of the hallmarks of critically literate readers. It enabled me to read technical articles by cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, economists, and others even though they each presupposed background knowledge within their fields that I lacked.

Having background knowledge presupposed in a text is a matter of *degree*. The less you have, the more you have to figure out. A critically literate reader, like a cryptographer, can reconstruct much of what is not given by reasoning analytically from what is given. It is more important for students to learn that good readers look up unknown references when necessary, go back and reread, and don't simply keep moving on, than for students to be given lots of background. Even the best readers do not immediately understand everything they read. Students need practice learning this kind of reading, as well as practice reading material on which they have background.