How cultural literacy makes us all insiders

Create discusses language, culture and progress with E. D. Hirsch, Jr.
E. D. Hirsch, Jr. is one of the most influential figures in educational thought and the author of several important works on schools and the curriculum.

His book Cultural Literacy remains a key text for educational reformers, in both the US and the UK, three decades after its original publication. Hirsch began his career as a professor of English and a literary critic, and became interested in education issues while conducting research into written composition. Founder and Chairman of the Core Knowledge Foundation, he is Professor Emeritus of Education and Humanities at the University of Virginia.

Cultural Literacy proposes that sharing in a national language should also mean knowledge of a canon of ideas, texts and cultural allusions that underpin that language. This is the shared knowledge that enables people to form implicit bonds as they communicate. It enables the rapid formation of alliances and the understanding of shared values. Without this knowledge, people will always be outsiders.

Create You write that ‘to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world’. How can this help to address opportunity?

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. Communication through language requires unspoken knowledge of things and values that are not overtly stated. In the 1960s, the results of some experiments I was conducting made me realise that the role of this unspoken knowledge in language had key implications for narrowing the competence gap between different demographic groups.

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Exclusion from this shared cultural knowledge is a major barrier to equal opportunity. That has been a consistent emphasis in my writings on education.

C. You say that ‘we have [a] bad memory for words but a good memory for meaning’.

E.D.H. The insight that our memory for the surface form of sentences fades quickly was one of the findings of the research. You mainly remember tone and gist.

However, nothing I have written would justify a preference for superficial over profound knowledge! It’s just that we can’t be experts in everything – but we nonetheless need to be able to understand what experts are telling us.

C. This approach seems to involve a wide-ranging education rather than a narrow range of subjects.

E.D.H. Common year-by-year subject matter does need to be prescribed up to a point. In my view, the basis of that common subject matter should be a mastery of the knowledge and vocabulary necessary for mastery of the national language. There is a finite body of knowledge, words, themes and values, which those who have mastered British English share. They can communicate with others in the nation by speech and writing. And after the Industrial Revolution and the creation of the modern nation state, that is how bridges get built in the nation. The digital age has only intensified this.
C. Some educationalists believe that British schools in the private sector provide their pupils with a social advantage in terms of the breadth of education, including a wide knowledge of the arts. What’s your view?

E.D.H. There is no inherent reason why a state school could not offer the same high literacy-inducing curriculum as a private school. They are only prevented from doing so by a system of ideas that regards schooling as fostering natural development and individuality, instead of regarding it, more accurately, as the induction of children into the national tribe.

The great Leftist thinker Gramsci insisted that all children should attend a common school that induces cultural competence. Gramsci was amazingly prescient in seeing that this knowledge should not remain the sole possession of the elite, but should be offered to every child.

The idea of education as the gradual initiation of the child into the adult tribe – the “anthropological” view of education as mainly training not mainly individual “growth” – is making a comeback.

Individuality is the fruit of mastering the conventions of the tribe. For example, when they begin, writers often lack individuality of style. They are victims rather than masters of convention. Individuality comes with mastery of convention. Only then can one successfully depart from it.

C. What active role should the arts play in embedding this shared knowledge?

E.D.H. The arts play a big role in the best national curriculums of the world. In Japan, more time is spent on the arts than on science in the early grades, and yet Japan scores at the top in science in the PISA rankings. In the United States, with our heavy emphasis on the testing of reading and math, the arts have been neglected. But our school graduates would score a lot better on their reading tests if they had experienced a wide-ranging curriculum that included the arts.
C. Many literary forms are rich in ideas and are wonderful aids to memory, and narrative is a framework to help interpret the world. Should we encourage a wider use of literary form to convey ideas?

E.D.H. Yes. We all depend on narratives and prior structures to make sense of new experiences. Narrative and poetry have always been the great teachers of mankind. As Daniel Willingham has pointed out, story is psychologically “privileged”. Lyric poetry is valuable above all – it compels a close attention to language and metaphor. It is thrillingly available. It lasts throughout a lifetime.

C. Your book Cultural Literacy references the Horrible Histories books as one way to learn – do you think that we could do with as much laughter as serious intent?

E.D.H. Yes!

C. Should we be providing teachers with greater cultural and artistic opportunities to broaden their own approach?

E.D.H. To teach a broad, arts-rich curriculum is to become broadly educated as a teacher. Ultimately, a knowledge-rich curriculum will lead to improvements in the education offered in teacher-training institutions.

C. Do you think that there is a conflict between teaching for a shared culture and teaching for academic outcomes?

E.D.H. I think this is the key policy issue in the aftermath of our educational failures in the United States.

‘Narrative and poetry have always been the great teachers of mankind.’
Shall we neglect the arts, poetry, history, civics, in the pursuit of better scores in math and reading? Well, such neglect has not worked. The narrowing of the school curriculum has caused the reading scores of our 17 year olds to decline. My thesis is that a broad curriculum, including the arts, poetry, history, civics, is the best means to form good readers and competent citizens.

C. There’s a tension between the need to use the energies of diversity and the need to have shared values for social cohesion. Can cultural literacy serve both these ends?

E.D.H. Yes, to this extent: learning the language and knowledge of the public sphere offers everybody peace, inter-communication and the tradition of toleration among multiple sub-cultures. The energies of diversity only express themselves if people respect each other and communicate with each other. Artists who celebrate diversity flourish in a thriving, effective pluralistic nation.

C. Can the idea of a national culture be an uncomfortable nationalist construct?

E.D.H. We moderns face the need of continual reinvention and improvement, and yet we still need to give our allegiance to what Benedict Anderson named “imagined communities”.

As Blake put it:

*Another England there I saw,*
*Another London with its Tower,*
*Another Thames and other hills,*
*And another pleasant Surrey bower.*

There’s no virtue in demolishing ideal visions if doing so makes national life worse. But there’s a difference between community-oriented patriotism and militant nationalism.

‘The energies of diversity only express themselves if people respect each other and communicate with each other.’
C. You have said that you don’t think that a curriculum should be set by the political classes, but possibly by universities.

E.D.H. “Nation” is a larger conception than ‘political party’. Universities are well equipped to rise above party. National culture-making is an implicit function of university humanities departments. Their curricular recommendations could carry trust among parents and citizens – if they put their minds to it.

C. Is there a case for involving potential employers more?

E.D.H. Our young people need to be citizens and to lead productive lives and contribute to their communities, not just contribute to the success of their employers.

C. Is our idea of education too compartmentalised along subject lines? Is there a role the arts can play, working with educators to bring together cultural elements?

E.D.H. Yes! The ideal kind of curriculum for the early grades is one that integrates topics across history and the arts. It’s the ideal we tried to exemplify in the Core Knowledge Sequence from pre-kindergarten through Grade Eight. The arts are well represented. The Core Knowledge Foundation is now hard at work to produce an instantly usable online curriculum downloadable for free, embracing history, geography, civics and the arts.

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C. Just how important is a large vocabulary?

E.D.H. This question of knowledge and vocabulary brings us back to the originating insight of my work – that relevant, unspoken knowledge is required to understand what is spoken.

It’s reasonable to gauge the effectiveness and fairness of a nation’s educational system by the scores made by its 17 year olds on a general reading test. Those scores reflect a person’s average ability to communicate within the public sphere.

But there is a difference between having a big vocabulary and possessing genuine knowledge. The two are not the same. Having a big vocabulary is just the beginning.

The marvellous utility of language resides in the fact that words can be used over and over, with different meanings on each occasion. That’s possible because we can disambiguate the words through our prior knowledge of the subject matter. Wide knowledge is the key to language mastery.

The arts are a central part of that knowledge, and a key means of conveying it to our children.
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