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## Cultural Literacy and the Commodification of Knowledge

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"Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will ever be of any service to them. . . ."

The speaker and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

—Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*, p. 1

The single most effective step [to reform the school curriculum] would be to shift the reading materials used in kindergarten through eighth grade to a much stronger base in factual information and traditional lore. . . . What is needed are reading texts that deliberately convey what children need to know and include a substantially higher proportion of factual narratives.

—E.D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy*, p. 140

Not long ago, I taught a special composition course linked to a large lecture class in social psychology. The link was designed to encourage the reciprocity of writing and learning, the theory being that the students would explore the concepts of social psychology more fully if they wrote about them, and that doing so would also help them to increase their proficiency as writers.

Two topics in the social psychology course were prejudice and aggression. During one of the units in my composition course, I asked the students to write personal experience essays about a time when they recognized either prejudice or aggression in their lives. On one day, the students formed small groups to describe the experiences they were planning to write about. I wandered from group to group, listening in and

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planning to write about the first time she recognized her own prejudices. She and her family were vacationing in Hawaii. In the hustle and bustle of downtown Honolulu, she felt deliberately jostled by the local Japanese, and began thinking them all rude and brusque. The more she was bumped into, the greater her dislike of the entire Japanese culture. The other students and I listened intently as she described her growing prejudice, her generalization that all Japanese are rude and unfriendly to Americans. "But," she said, looking at us sincerely, "isn't it true that Americans and Japanese have some traditional animosity toward each other? I mean, wasn't there some sort of conflict at one point between the two countries?"

On another occasion I was teaching a course in advanced expository writing. The students had written rough drafts of a short research paper investigating a topic of their choice, and I was reading those drafts in preparation for conference groups the next day. The topics were interesting and varied: a history of the Academie Francaise; the problem of animal cruelty in laboratory experiments; gender differences in sports, and their implications for physical education instruction. One paper was titled "Michelangelo the Painter." Attached to the student's draft was an article she had read about the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The article focused on how, after layers of dirt and grime had been painstakingly removed from the ceiling, researchers had begun to learn about Michelangelo as a painter—his use of color, the way he blended certain shades of paint, the particulars of his style.

In a very sincere voice, the student wrote about this marvelous discovery—that in the process of cleaning the Sistine Chapel ceiling, some workers had discovered a huge painting which, miraculously, turned out to be by Michelangelo! Barely containing her euphoria, the student went on for another page or two discussing the implications of learning that Michelangelo wasn't just a sculptor but was a painter as well.

All of us have stories like these, two of my personal favorites. In adding yet another essay to the numerous critiques of cultural literacy, I am acutely aware of what good stories they make, of what a good laugh we get from them, or gasp of amused horror, before we frown to contemplate their implications. How could any college student not know that Michelangelo was a painter, and that he painted a vast narrative of the creation, fall, and redemption of mankind across the panels of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, a masterpiece unprecedented in the history of art? How could a college junior not know about the role of the Japanese in World War II, even in a rudimentary way—about Pearl Harbor, about Kamikaze pilots and Hirohito and Hiroshima and Iwo Jima, or about the internment of Japanese Americans in the United States?

Teachers lacking stories like these, teachers blessed with students who seem to pull knowledge out of their pockets like loose change, are probably aware nevertheless that 80% of a sample of American high school students identified a passage from Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* as coming from the "Declaration of Independence," or that only 65% could locate Germany on a map, or that three of every ten students couldn't place the Civil War in the correct half-century, and that only half the students could do the same for World War I; or that only one in five could identify Joyce, Dostoevsky, Ellison, Conrad, Ibsen, Hardy, and Henry James. And now a kind of folk mythology is developing around the notion of students' cultural illiteracy, best illustrated in one "urban classroom legend," the story of the young teenager from Rahway, New Jersey, who revealed a complete ignorance of the Statue of Liberty, even though he was standing in its head when he was questioned.

These are seductive stories, and compelling data. They are precisely why the idea of cultural literacy—of trying to specify and teach a fixed body of cultural knowledge—has spread like a grass fire across the country, as if to reduce the educational landscape to ashes so we can start again with the dried seeds of cultural antiquity: Aristotle and Plato and the Great Books. Daily we are further besieged by the details of our youth's ignorance, from studies like the National Assessment of Educational Progress and its test of literature and U.S. History, published in popular form by Finn and Ravitch as *What Do Our Seventeen Year Olds Know?*, and from the recently publicized assessment of Americans' geographical knowledge.

But if the stories are so compelling, why do many of us feel so torn, often to the point of hand-wringing, between denying and supporting the idea of cultural literacy, between admiring its theory and hating ourselves for falling victim to so conservative a position? Why, on Friday, do we find ourselves lustily attracted to the aura of "required knowledge," only to find by Monday that it makes an impossible bedfellow? Why, every so often, do we have the urge to take E.D. Hirsch's list of "what every American needs to know" into our own classes to shock our students into intellectual rigor, but then remember that we ourselves had our share of trouble with items like Hegelian dialectic, nucleotides, and Golgotha?

Asked about the subject of cultural literacy, many teachers confess to uncertainty—to feeling its paradoxes. There are conservative days when we want to cry out against the low tide of intellect and all the cultural garbage along its shores—days like the one I had not long ago when during a quiz in my large lecture course on the English language, a third of the students couldn't answer the question about what was wrong semantically with the sentence "the young cow sired the little calf" be-



cause, in spite of being born and raised in the heartland, they had never heard of the word "sire." Then there are our more enlightened days, days when we are impressed by our students' diversity of knowledge, and by their inquisitiveness and the treasures that learning seems to hold for them. We are challenged by our jobs, joyful of our students' progress, fascinated in their development.<sup>1</sup>

I believe there is an explanation for our contradictory feelings about cultural literacy, and it lies, quite simply, in the difference between problems and solutions. As I will suggest in the remainder of this essay, we must not fall into the trap of rejecting the *problem* of cultural literacy from consideration; to do so puts us in the position of arguing against what's wrong about cultural literacy (its way of turning knowledge into a static commodity) by treating the concept itself in a static way, a sort of inert *thing* that can be examined, dissected, and tossed into the intellectual wastebasket. Instead, we do better to debilitate the concept by actively pressuring its underlying theory. In the process, the theory itself cannot emerge unscathed, but the net result is a positive realigning of positions and priorities, part of a continual process of negotiation, learning, and change.

### Cultural Literacy as Theoretical Problem

Most educators today admit that the world desperately needs our profession; our careers thrive because learning *doesn't*. Sisyphus-like, we spend our lives relentlessly pushing the same boulder up the hill of our national intellect, each year to have it roll back to the bottom as we face with growing fatigue and age another crop of eighteen-year-olds, beaming with fresh youth. We have survived, in part, by not taking ourselves too seriously, by chuckling at the stories that have become the daily fare of living and working with the problem. We are socially bound together by the problems of education; we draw our energy from discussing them, and we find solace in the fact that we're not alone in our struggle.

In this respect, we should welcome the fervor that Hirsch and Bloom and people of their ilk have created over how to define an "educated citizen." It is helpful to think and talk about what it is we want students to know and, perhaps most importantly, why they should know it. This is one positive dimension of cultural literacy, a series of questions that concern us, as teachers, and pressure us to reexamine our theories of what educated people should know.

Consider, for example, some of the interesting and useful debates along

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<sup>1</sup> Note the typical equivocation in the titles of articles like Leila Christenbury's "Cultural Literacy: A Terrible Idea Whose Time has Come," which examines some of our contradictory feelings about the theory and practice of cultural literacy.

the borders of cultural literacy. Cultural literacy has compelled us to reexamine the idea of a literacy crisis, to question what we mean by the terms "literacy" or "cultural knowledge." Are teenagers really less educated than a decade or a century ago, or is what we hear simply the usual (and perennial) anecdotal frenzy over teenagers' plummeting knowledge? While public lack of confidence in young people's intellectual capacities is well documented in popular magazines, some critics have cried foul, arguing that the problem is vastly overblown. Aside from the case of undereducated politicians, writes Wayne Booth in an "open letter" to Hirsch,

I do *not* find, when I look at what little we can discover of our national cognitive state twenty-five, fifty, a hundred years ago, a utopian harmony of ends and means, a lovely community of folks who could discourse easily together because they knew the same things. Maybe it existed at the top of the heap, particularly the kind of heap one could find in New England or the aristocratic South. . . . In short, you too often seem to forget that as recently as fifty years ago, only about one-third of Americans even *entered* high school, let alone graduated. (p. 13).

In other words, in accommodating many more citizens, the democratization of education has weakened the general profile from how it was once defined by a privileged elite. And there is other evidence to reassure us—more working scientists, the greatest consumption of books per capita, more institutions of higher learning than at any time in our history. The question of cultural literacy, then, has at least created a need for a more concerted study of what we mean by national intellect and, more importantly, how and from which social and cultural groups it is measured.

In addition to such examinations of what we mean by knowledge or literacy, another agenda suggested by the term "cultural" has thankfully opened up productive debates about the status and nature of knowledge—and knowledge-making and knowledge-using—among various cultures and *within* what we might call the "mainstream." The initial cry against Hirsch's definition of "culture" was followed by a principled, thorough critique of the "canon" vis-a-vis cultural diversity. Hirsch's work, in other words, seems to have been centrally responsible for all sorts of discussions about the nature of a "liberal education," from Berkeley and the University of Minnesota all the way down to the curriculums of elementary schools.

In analyzing Hirsch's work from this perspective—a theoretical problematic—it is useful to question its assumptions, and the blend of academic and utilitarian ideology it espouses. *Cultural Literacy* as text is full of images and metaphors that betray a view of students as tabula

rasas—empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge (Allan Bloom uses the term “natural savages”). Booth culls the evidence for this static “container/contained” model of education in phrases like “only by piling up specific information can children,” “Literacy requires the early and continued transmission of specific cultural information,” and literacy “enables us to give and receive complex information orally and in writing.” Words like “convey,” “contain,” “transmit,” “incorporate,” “survey,” and “cover” abound. Presumably, providing cultural literacy is to awaken our poor lifeless students, to give something where there was nothing.

A view of the self as void of cultural knowledge immediately changes our roles from orchestrators of literacy and learning to transmitters; we no longer need to privilege the knowledge that students possess, or figure out ways to integrate new knowledge and perspectives into what already exists. We simply make it available, and, when that fails, we make it available with a vengeance. No one, however, not even Hirsch, really believes that today’s students are blank slates. But in the view of the cultural literati, what knowledge is already there has neither life nor meaning. Someone who constructed some of her cultural knowledge during the sixties, for example, will find few echoes of that era in Hirsch’s list, other than the token “Beatles” and a few other stereotypical items. Yet cultural knowledge abounds in the pages of *Cultural Literacy*. Coincidentally, perhaps, it’s the kind that means something to Hirsch and his colleagues and people of their generation and class. As Ivan Illich writes in *Deschooling Society*:

There is . . . a shared view of youth which is psychologically romantic and politically conservative. According to this view, changes in society must be brought about by burdening the young with the responsibility of transforming it—but only after their eventual release from school. It is easy for a society founded on such tenets to build up a sense of its responsibility for the education of the new generation, and this inevitably means that some men may set, specify, and evaluate the personal goals of others. . . . In the peasant, the vision of men with such inscrutable logic [as tax collectors], empowered to assess his cattle, must have induced a chilling sense of impotence. Students, for analogous reasons, tend to feel paranoiac when they seriously submit to a curriculum. Inevitably they are even more frightened than my imaginary . . . peasant, because it is their life goals rather than their life-stock which is being branded with an inscrutable sign.

Illich’s commentary has special significance for the theory of cultural literacy because such a goal assumes that students’ own cultures must be

subverted and replaced by the representation of "good" culture in pieces of factual knowledge. A child who grows up in a non-violent community and is forced to learn hundreds of facts about the tools of war and the benefits of armed aggression will eventually resent his teachers and rebel against their authority. Being insensitive to the diversity of students' cultures can lead only to their systematic disenfranchisement—the "lost causes" we so often blame not on our own educational systems and methods but on the cultures of the students themselves.

Even more remote from the representation of knowledge saturating the pages of *Cultural Literacy* are today's young students. For the average teenager, popular culture plays an extraordinary role in what we might call "cultural literacy," yet, like a dictionary with no new recent words, neither *Cultural Literacy* nor the massive encyclopedia that followed on its heels contains anything at all of such information. This absence is especially ironic when we find the same types of information included from other recent periods of popular culture. Why, the sixteen-year-old may ask, isn't *Virgin* in there? Or *Remote Control*? Or *Tokyo Pop*? This is the kind of knowledge fundamental to many high-school students' social lives, yet we ignore it. The typical teenager today is teeming with cultural information; she knows about *Sega*, which makes *Shinobi* and the *Dragon*; she knows about *Gotcha*, and she talks with her friends about *Mystic Pizza* and how cool *Tim Robbins* and *Tom Cusack* were in it, or what sort of performance *Fred Savage* gave in *Vice Versa*, or "In Excess" (spelled *INXS*, which I once mispronounced "Inks" to the great dismay of my colleague's teenage daughter), or *Depeche Mode*, or *Salt N' Peppa*, the rap group that made it to *Yo M-TV* and served as a cultural progenitor of highly flamboyant and controversial groups such as *2 Live Crew*. We can reject right away, in other words, the premise that our students are *void* of cultural knowledge; perhaps we might say that they are too full. Nor can we say with any certainty that this cultural knowledge is any less complex than other forms.

Along these lines, consider a scenario. Imagine that your teenager starts telling you at the dinner table about the recent movement dubbed "deconstructivist" architecture. One of its leading proponents is a famous architect named *Peter Eisenman*. Deconstructivist architecture, you learn, is an outgrowth of postmodernist architecture—perhaps a rejection of it is more appropriate—influenced both by deconstruction in literary theory (the theory that art can have a number of equally legitimate but mutually exclusive interpretations: *Derrida* is a close friend of *Eisenman*), and also by Constructivist art, which emerged in the early 20th century as an alternative to postmodernism. In a nutshell, deconstructivist architecture challenges the values of harmony and stability; the buildings seem to explode, or are demonically warped, with randomly protruding columns and tilted ceilings. In one of *Eisenman's*

houses, a huge post bisects the master bedroom from floor to ceiling, making it virtually impossible to get a standard bed into the room.

Now imagine your teenager gives you a different synopsis at the dinner table, this one about the history and development of head-banger rock. Head-banger rock, you learn, is a rather insidious outgrowth of hard rock which has affinities with New Wave in its frenetic double-time beat, and, by association, with punk—but without either's sensitivity to progressive harmonics or lyrics. It's actually an especially male genre of music, encouraging a strange kind of violent bonding at its all-male night-club scene but decidedly not homosexual in nature. It also sports several sub-genres, including a "pretty-boy" set, whose band members are often cute primped men with bouffant hairstyles, makeup, and tight leather pants; and a very hard set, whose bands would rather play live than work in a recording studio, and at whose concerts you might see "stage-diving" and hear crowd refrains built into the lyrics of songs.

I want to suggest here that our response to these capsules of cultural knowledge are admittedly very different: most of us welcome the first and reject the second. We do so, I contend, not because the *they have a different order of complexity* but because they reflect altogether different cultural and intellectual purposes. The first we associate with all that is inspiring and noble about our species—the creation of artistic as well as functional dwellings; the development of theories about form and design and interpretation. The second, in contrast, we would say reflects a culture gone sour, a decadence in which art is replaced by degeneracy and nihilism. (Ironically, the deconstructivist movement in architecture has also been called decadent and nihilistic in its rejection of symmetry, beauty, and proportion—yet, perhaps by virtue of its strongly academic foundation, is thought much loftier than head-banger rock, with its seemingly anti-intellectual manifestations).

My argument is specious, of course, because even though many of our students may be full of cultural knowledge of various types, they *fail to analyze and talk about it* in such an intellectually promising way. They might tell us, instead, that head-banger rock is cool, or that it's trash; or that Deconstructivist architecture is weird, or that it's neat how huge hollow pipes come right through the wall of one of its buildings. In this case, it doesn't matter whether they're talking about the Bangles or Bach—both kinds of knowledge are lifeless. Because it comes in discrete pieces of information and is therefore not integrated into existing schemas, lifeless knowledge uncritical, unquestioning, inactive—something owned but not read, a commodity never used, or used only to its weakest potential. Providing cultural knowledge alone won't make a bit of difference if the problem lies in how that knowledge gets into students' minds and what happens to it once it gets there. Much "popular cul-



ture" as knowledge only seems ephemeral (and therefore useless) compared with knowledge we consider timeless because we don't bother to question and critique and analyze ephemeral in the way we do with the so-called "enduring questions." Students who own and can then stand outside popular culture find as much to question in it as the loftiest philosopher reflecting on the works of Kant or Euripides. Conversely, students who are simply required to identify Kant and Euripides give about as much intellectual potential to that knowledge as a great philosopher who, in the dim recesses of his consciousness, recognizes the term "head-banger rock" and can associate it with popular music.

In discussing cultural literacy as problem, finally, it is worth recognizing and perhaps pursuing a balance between the need for a "national discourse" and the consequences of a completely nihilistic "anti-foundationalism" which, in Bizzell's words, "leads to a dangerous sort of political quietism . . . [which] may end up tacitly supporting the political and cultural status quo" (p. 667). In other words, in our tendency to dichotomize, we cling either to the conservative position of advocating a specific, traditional body of cultural knowledge, or we "throw up our hands" and submit to a sort of radical relativism, in which there can be no final truth, no final authority, and no ideologically organizing scheme to human intellect relative to the texts and traditions that are supposed to define it.

A middle position would argue that there is absolutely nothing wrong with wanting very deeply, and perhaps even vehemently, to teach culturally acknowledged works and ideas—a "canon," to be sure. This is an ideological perspective dubbed "academic" by Peter Mosenthal: the goal of "pass[ing] on from one generation to the next the knowledge, skills, and social and moral values of the cultural that previous generations deemed important for succeeding generations to acquire" (p. 39). There is nothing inherently wrong with wanting our students to know about history so that when they must make fundamental decisions about their personal fate or the fate of our world, they will do so from an informed position. There is nothing wrong with wanting our students to read and talk and write about *Madame Bovary* or *The Awakening* so they might think more deeply about unhappiness and suicide, the relationship between husbands and wives, or autonomy and sacrifice. Or about issues of race and oppression in *The Color Purple*, *Invisible Man*, *Hunger for Memory*, *Native Son*, or *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. For that matter, there is nothing wrong with wanting our students to know where the double helix came from, or what the czars were and why they were overthrown, or what absolute zero means, or what's so important about the fall of Icarus, that someone painted it and someone else wrote a poem about that painting. These purposes inform every decision we make about a syllabus or a class reading, or what we tell our students about our

subject matter. Even the most radical teachers would have to agree that we may tolerate our students' carrying around a lot of what appears to us to be useless knowledge, but we won't tolerate it if this becomes a substitute for the kind of intellectual perspectives that can help them problematize and rethink their own knowledge. The issue is one we are quite familiar with because it is the core of our work: helping students to integrate new knowledge—and knowledge of the most liberating and intellectual kind—into old.

At the heart of cultural literacy, then, are issues so important to our academic work that it should be impossible for us to abandon the struggle to resolve the problems it raises. In some of the most enjoyable and successful faculty workshops I have attended, the notion of cultural literacy (by that or any other name) has inspired fascinating discussions about what constitutes a liberal education, what students should read, and how students best learn about themselves, the world, and their history. And, thanks largely to Hirsch, we are by no means done.

### Cultural Literacy as Educational Solution

Let us now consider what is wrongheaded and dangerous about cultural literacy—cultural literacy as *educational solution*. In particular, I want to propose some reasons why we should be fundamentally opposed to developing lists of essential information as a way to resolve an educational need: helping students to acquire the sort of knowledge that may be alien to their own cultural dispositions or backgrounds.

The greatest limitation of using the theory of cultural literacy as a solution to students' limited knowledge is that it simply worsens the problem. It does this by creating an image of education—for our students and for the public at large—which actually mitigates learning, and works against the sorts of attitudes that might inspire students to have what we might call educational self-determination. As I have argued elsewhere (“Crisis” and “Book Lists”), we need to think about knowledge as dialectic; as hermeneutic cycles of challenge, integration, and understanding; as process; as intellectual motion. By reinforcing a view of knowledge as static, we essentially give permission to our students not to think about information but simply to own it, as commodity. And so we end up with teenagers at the dinner table with exactly the sort of reactive but uncritical knowledge Hirsch thinks they should have: that Falstaff was fat and jolly and was in one of Shakespeare's plays. Or that the Bangles are cool. Or that deconstructivist architecture is weird. As John Warnock has written in his article “Cultural Literacy: A Worm in the Bud,” there is something “fundamentally misguided in thinking about comprehension without also thinking about who the comprehender is in relation to the object of comprehension.” The development of literacy and intellect, he



says, is characterized by words like *active*, *actual*, *critical*, *dialectical*, *rhetorical*, and *writerly*, sharing a focus on the relation between the knower and the known, and frequently suggesting a relation in which the self is at risk. By displaying and modeling learning as the accumulation of disparate facts, we effectively turn students away (especially attitudinally) from the advantages arising from such an active approach.

Ironically, cultural literacy as solution has affinities with the sorts of values Hirsch and other cultural literati would hope to suppress. Consider, for example, the nature of most lists: they are bundles of *things*. Hirsch's contains almost 5,000 nouns, from the Abominable Snowman to the Zodiac. Many of our students are already heavily influenced by our commodity-centered culture, which turns processes into static objects. This is already reflected in our language, which increasingly takes away the life embedded in its verbs in favor of nominalizing these and following them with existential *be*. Now we have a model of learning in the schools that simply reinforces the very culture it seeks to overthrow, a model based on the passive accumulation of disparate bits of knowledge, a kind of trivial pursuits. Lists of facts turn the active, dialectical, integrating and accommodating processes of learning into disconnected fragments of information.

The underlying purpose of such an accumulation is to create communicative efficiency. The theory of cultural literacy focuses entirely on the development of *a priori* knowledge—knowledge which is supposed to precede intellectual or utilitarian function (reading the *New York Times*, for example, or carrying on good cocktail chatter without embarrassed ignorance of the concept of "absolute zero" or that Verdi wrote operas). The continued accumulation of knowledge, particularly in its most active form, has no place in this world of educational efficiency. But when learning works well, it is rarely efficient—even when it is most cultural (and most tacitly gained). The very struggle to accommodate and integrate new ideas and knowledge is difficult, which is partly what makes learning fulfilling. This issue of *a priori* knowledge is particularly insidious in the area of testing, whose manifestation in large-scale assessments runs the risk of ethnic and other forms of discrimination.

Finally, institutionalized lists often tear the responsibility for making informed decisions out of the hands of the people most appropriate to make these decisions (educators) and put it into the hands of committees, or even a few self-appointed "administrators" of knowledge. When that happens, humane, intelligent teachers end up pandering to someone else's ideology, someone else's choices. And no list, no matter how many people have contributed to it, is ideologically free (ex-Secretary of Education William Bennett's list of "great books," for example, was dominated by white, male, European authors, so blatantly patriarchal and tradi-

tional that even the least astute readers had to admit that he was wearing his ideology on his rhetorical sleeve). Even when we might support the doomed attempt to reach consensus about which forms of knowledge "define" our culture and should therefore define our curriculum, we also take away the joys of discovery from our students, or the potential for discoveries we and our students can make together in the context of our classrooms. Most of us remember clearly and with considerable fondness a time when, as students, we discovered a really wonderful and famous book on our own, and read it, and owned that discovery precisely because it wasn't required, preselected, or sanctioned by our school. Similarly, we all recall a time when, as teachers, we and our students made some wonderful discoveries that we can never repeat because now they *are* discovered, and have lost their energy. This is the kind of diversity—spontaneous and otherwise—that makes teaching and learning so satisfying.

### Beyond Cultural Literacy

When we think about the range of choices we and our students must make in deciding what to learn, we should feel enlightened. There is much evidence of a new dialectic in education which, instead of pushing us back to lists, opens up possibilities for the active, critical examination of knowledge, in all its forms, from all its sources—a kind of "critical literacy."

Hirsch's vision of cultural literacy, however, explicitly rejects a curriculum oriented toward processes because such a focus often pushes to the periphery the specific *content* that students should be learning. Clearly, such a dichotomy will not do. Content as commodity, as I have argued, fails precisely because content must be *enacted* somehow in the context of students' needs, interests, cultures, and lives. Process alone, as Hirsch argues, also fails precisely because it must operate on and be instantiated by something concrete and culture-laden. What we need, then, is a process-oriented curriculum whose subject is existing knowledge and whose outcome is the modification and growth of that existing knowledge. Some teachers like Shoshana Kerewsky ("Playing With Cultural Literacy") are experimenting with strategies that can achieve both these goals; Kerewsky wants to "develop materials that would use the cultural literacy list as a means to greater comprehension and expression, not simply as an end." Cultural literacy by itself, she suggests, yields students who are able to list every American president in chronological order but know so little about how to find and accumulate new information that they don't know and which reference work to use if they want to learn more about a particular president. Kerewsky's solution is to turn cultural literacy into an active educational tool. Teams of students are given several

hundred terms from Hirsch's list, and then, through active, critical research, not only define each term but explain something about its field, why Hirsch would think the term is important, and how and where they were able to find the information. Following the activity, which takes several days, the students then critique the entire process of amassing factual information. Some students, for example, want to see the material organized into a curricular sequence, while others favor it as an add-on. While still seeming to teach bits of cultural knowledge for their own sake, this experiment suggests the power of taking an active, dialectical approach to learning.

At its highest level, such an approach would call into question the very essence of the information or facts that students might be asked to learn. As Knoblauch describes it, this form of "critical literacy" is aimed at a "critical consciousness of the social conditions in which people find themselves, recognizing the extent to which language practices objectify and rationalize these conditions and the extent to which people with authority to name the world dominate others whose voices they have been able to suppress" (79). For Knoblauch, literacy constitutes a means to power, a way to "seek political enfranchisement." Hirsch would argue that those members of society who have gained such power have done so by accumulating the "shared knowledge" of those already in power. The agenda Knoblauch described would rather question the source of the power (which is said to hold the knowledge) by means of questioning the knowledge itself. To put it more concretely, if a list of great books contains none by women writers, it is clear that those in power to draw up such a list have silenced the voices of women and systematically marginalized them as a group. Instead of passively submitting to the list, educators and students call into question the very nature of the "cultural knowledge" being taught, and actively undermine its holders, who have seen it fit to disenfranchise others by exclusion. In this sort of learning, the facts and knowledge *not* on the list (or tacitly shared by the dominant group) are at least as important as what is included.

These ways of integrating the theory of cultural literacy into instruction will further the lively contemporary debates about the processes of education. It is clear, however, that no matter how we deal with the concept of cultural literacy in our instruction (and not *whether*, because everything we teach must be in some sense cultural and in some sense *literated*), we must embrace an active approach to education and avoid ridiculing students on the basis of how many facts they have accumulated. Like its counterparts skin color, clothing, and degree of wealth, the commodification of knowledge serves little other purpose than discrimination, a discrimination based on what one group thinks another should have, do, or look like.

Thanks to the absence of such discrimination by “knowledge commodity,” two students of mine had the opportunity to learn something significant because they had the freedom to do so and because the need to do so came from within. One, a junior, was writing a paper about Michelangelo as a painter. Before she revised the paper, she found out something important about her knowledge of painting. By the time she had polished the final draft, she’d returned to do a significant amount of background reading on Michelangelo—as a painter and as a sculptor—and about 16th-century art. She also learned quite a bit about the active processes of learning.

The other student revealed to her peers in a small group that she didn’t know anything about the role of Japan in World War II. Before she had revised her paper, the student found the motivation to do a little history homework. Now she doesn’t just recognize that Hiroshima happened, she’s placed it in a larger context; she doesn’t just recognize that the Japanese were put into internment camps during the War, she knows something about why, and what’s been done recently to rectify it. These wider perspectives are not the kind of knowledge available in a list.

I am tempted to conclude simply by saying that lists of factual knowledge are not the point. But I am reminded of a poem by Howard Nemerov that said something similar much more eloquently. In the poem, titled “The Blue Swallows,” Nemerov is tempted to write about seven blue swallows dividing the air across the millstream below a bridge. He ends by suggesting that very purpose of writing a poem is not to produce the *commodity* of a poem—and nor, would I suggest, is the purpose of exploring and gaining knowledge, simply to own it:

Oh, swallows, swallows, poems are not  
The point. Finding again the world,  
That is the point, where loveliness adorns intelligible things  
Because the mind’s eye lit the sun.

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