

## GREATER LITERACY OR GREATER HUMANITY: THE GREAT LITERACY DIVIDE BETWEEN HIRSCH AND FREIRE

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Having immersed myself in the deeper meanings of literacy and the social order, I find myself asking if it all comes down to this: “greater literacy or greater humanity” (1). Those were the words that, finally, struck a chord as I began to understand the polarity that each represents for the other, the “greater literacy” modality of compatriot E. D. Hirsch with the “greater humanity” modality of the equally magnanimous Paulo Freire, two of the most influential, if not revolutionary, educational theorists of the twentieth century.

A great divide over the two forces at play remains constant, but it gave me pause to consider the weaker link in each. Why do so many academics point to Hirsch’s elitism, his lack of humanity? Is he disingenuous in his attempt to improve the social status of the under classes through literacy, or is it simply a convenient, politically correct by-product of a nationalistic literacy campaign? And, what is it about Freirean pedagogy that makes me feel like everyone is a white supremacist conspiring to subjugate the functionally illiterate - even the nice old ladies in the local garden club? Are literacy and guerrilla warfare synonymous? Further, how might one bridge that narrow supposition of “either/or” posed by Elspeth Stuckey when she penned the phrase “greater literacy or greater humanity?” As it is, it is a great source of division within the education community itself.

Finally, I want to share my feeling that this “divide”, as is, still offers the best hope against defeatism; it is far easier to merely give up than to penetrate the realities of an imperfect world. Sadly, it is this “imperfect world” that we can all agree on. *We* are meaning, collectively, Hirsch and Freire and their respective disciples, the critics, the theorists, myself. Attempts to correct the injustices systemic to American society must be applauded, yet there is no winner to take all. And, far too often the most vocal critics of the status quo “talk the talk,” but they don’t “walk the walk.” Participation is required if we are to avert the spiraling effects of “the Fall” into “the Eden” of our hopeful imaginings (2).

The genesis of Hirsch’s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (1987), was the recognition in the 1970’s by the veteran University of Virginia professor of English that there was a “widening knowledge gap” that, through subsequent research, lead him to determine two things”

First, we cannot assume that young people today know things that were known in the past by almost every literate person in the culture. [...] Second, [...] we cannot treat reading and writing as empty skills, independent of specific skills (Hirsch 8).

Hirsch’s remedy, which came to be equally abhorred and praised, was the formulation of a list of some 5,000 names, phrases, dates, and concepts drawn up by a three member university panel, including himself, representing the fields of English, history, and physics. The overriding effect would be to provide a common ground of knowledge in the tradition of the American experience. If all the people of the United States would embrace this list either through standardized, protracted study of classic works beginning in the elementary grades and continuing through college or, through personal initiative, Hirsch reasoned that we could, as a nation, “achieve not only greater economic prosperity but also a greater social justice and more effective democracy” (Hirsch 2).

Who in their right mind would argue against that? By sharing this “greater literacy” with all participants of American society, we will not only have more economic freedom; we will experience “greater social justice and more effective democracy.” Is that not what we would all hope for ourselves and future generations? Well, depending on how you look at it, yes and no.

In his book *Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden: Du Bois, King, Malcolm X, and Emancipatory Composition* (1999), Bradford Stull argues quite forcefully that, ultimately, “[i]t is not enough to recite the received language if emancipation is the aim. Rather, the received language must be turned over, around, inside-out” (Stull 120). One is suddenly compelled to ask what Hirsch’s aim is. Is emancipation at the heart of *Cultural Literacy* or some other rationale? On closer inspection, particularly Hirsch’s chapter titled “National Language and National Culture,” we get the message loud and clear:

The easiest way to standardize and stabilize a language is to follow the European pattern: fix upon a single dialectal norm, freeze its grammar at a particular time, fix standard spelling, and fix pronunciations that are reasonably well represented by the spellings (Hirsch 77).

This “formula” is a far cry from Stull’s take on language as the liberation front. True “emancipatory composition,” says Stull, “is radically Theo political [...] because [...] it calls into question this language and thus the American experience itself” (Stull 3). With words like standardize, stabilize, fix, and freeze, we see Hirsch not as a liberation theologian in the sense of Frederick Douglas or Martin Luther King, but as a reactionary whose concern for the nation ignores or, worst yet, dismisses what educators Steven Arvizu and Marietta Saravia-Shore call the “cultural relevance” of “diverse learner populations” (Arvizu 1). Central to Hirsch’s concept of literacy is the homogeneity of the culture’s dominant language and a denial that language is, at its core, an agent of political change. Extracted from a previous paper I wrote titled “Hirsch and the Formation of Modern National Cultures,” Hirsch is of the mind that “nation building” is paramount to the stability of the American culture and as such, we must put aside the petty nationalistic claims of subordinate cultures in order to realize ‘a more perfect union’.” Hirsch says openly In *Cultural Literacy* that he shares the views of Dr. M.M. Guxman: “every national language is a conscious construct that transcends any particular dialect, region, or social class” (Hirsch 82).

Arvizu and Saravia-Shore take umbrage in their article “Cross-Cultural Literacy: An Anthropological Approach to Dealing with Diversity”:

Hirsch would have been better advised to use the notion of American cultural heritages, taking into account changing conditions that shape our knowledge, values, and customs over time, rather than treating our society as monolithic, uniform, and fixed in our cultural character and traditions (1).

In effect then, Hirsch may well be alienating the very factions he wishes to pull together under that big tent known as the American flag. Perhaps he should have added Dick Leith to his reading list. After all, it was Leith in the socio-linguistic groundbreaking book, *A Social History of English* (1998), who warned us, through many historical accounts and references, of the dangers of forcing a dominant language down the throats of unwilling peoples:

“[Standardization] involves from the first, the cultivation, by an elite, of a variety that can be regarded as exclusive. [...] In short, the process means the creation of a class dialect that is imposed on an often resentful, and sometimes bewildered, populace” (Leith 33).

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For under classed minority students, especially the bilingual student, it is a double edged sword: on the one hand, is the sense that their own identity is inferior and not worthy of contribution, and on the other is the alienation one often feels from fellow ethnic connections - family and friends - when one successfully embraces the dominant culture and ideologically moves away from his/her ethnic roots. It is a “Catch 22” in every sense. In *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self* (2000) by Robert P. Yagelski, assistant professor of English at the University of New York at Albany, Yagelski generously quotes Elspeth Stuckey whose book *The Violence of Literacy*, confronts the issue head on:

The extraordinary power of the educational process and of literacy standards not merely to exclude citizens from participating in the country’s economic and political life but to brand them and their children with indelible prejudice, the prejudice of language (Yagelski 5).

Arvizu and Saravia-Shore, more subtle perhaps, but equally informed, advance their notion of an anthropological approach:

By respecting their [minority] cultures and recognizing the skills that students bring with them from their homes as foundations on which to build, such teachers enhance each student’s sense of security, self-respect and belonging. Teachers’ behavior that demonstrates respect for the value systems of parents from diverse cultures also avoids the alienation between generations that resulted from the earlier type of immigrant education (Arvizu 7).

In the first chapter of Yagelski’s book, *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*, titled “Abby’s Lament,” Yagelski recalls one of his more troubling forays into the real world to share the exciting possibilities of the technological age while visiting a small high school in the Adirondacks. Sixteen year old “Abby” was turned off, tuned out, and adamant only about her belief that she was “a nobody without a legitimate voice.” After Yagelski reviewed her curriculum, he realized that “most of what Abby is asked to do as a writer and reader in school has little relevance to her social, political, cultural, and economic life outside school” (Yagelski 5).

Clearly, Hirsch needs “greater humanity” if he is to succeed in cultivating a “greater literacy” whose principle aim is to unite the nation, spread the wealth, abate the social injustices that continue to dog us, and expand the democratic process to all levels of society. Indeed, few would dispute that Hirsch has the best interest of the nation at heart; but if only we could soften it! Consider this passage:

Literate culture is the most democratic culture in our land: it excludes nobody; it cuts across generations and social groups and classes; it is not usually one’s first culture, but it should be everyone’s second, existing as it does beyond the narrow spheres of family, neighborhood, and region (Hirsch 21).

Yes, everything was going smoothly, positively, the passionate defense of cultural literacy as the all-encompassing mother of democratic enfranchisement. But, it would have been a “greater humanity” moment had he not enlisted that nasty word “narrow.” Such are the rough edges of E.D. Hirsch, the thoughtful scholar who often ponders the infinite possibilities of a literate society, yet, he somehow fails to account for the most basic premise articulated in the Declaration of Independence and alluded to by Stull:

[...] America has yet to fulfill the utopian dreams embedded in its founding documents and dreams: that it is, in fact, a land of liberty and justice for all (2).

Where Hirsch largely ignores the esoteric, radical political impact of literacy, Paulo Freire's *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (1987), elevates the political overtones of literacy to such an extent that it makes it difficult and impractical in the American education system. Indeed, my first encounter with Freirean pedagogy conjured up freedom fighters in El Salvador, donned in fatigues, learning Marxist liberation speak between guerrilla exercises. Apparently, my naiveté is rather commonplace. In his article, "Issues in Freirean Pedagogy," Tom Heaney says that:

[...] Freirean programs in this country have raised consciousness, but seldom directly influenced social change. Their revolutionary bark has clearly been more fearsome than their bite (Heaney 4).

Consider this passage in which Freire shares his vision of a different society with co-author Donaldo Macedo:

[M]y dream of a different society, one in which saying the word is a fundamental right and not merely a habit, in which saying the word is the right to become a part of the decision to transform the world. To read the word that one says in this perspective presupposes the reinvention of today's society. The reinvention of society, on the other hand, requires the reinvention of power. A political perspective that only dreams of a radical change of the bourgeoisie and the seizing of power is not sufficient. [...] Historical transformation [...] is more important than taking power. We ought not to be concerned with the mere shifting of power from one group to another. It is necessary to understand that in seizing power one must transform it. [...] The reinvention of the productive act takes place to the degree that people's discourse is legitimized in terms of people's wishes, decisions, and dreams, not merely empty words" (Freire 55).

Freire's passage reminds me of a line by Harold Bloom, who, in describing the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, once said, "her poetry stands at the edge where what is most worth saying is all but impossible to say" (Bishop vii). Little wonder Freire arouses such veneration worldwide: he is a deep thinker who lives his message of critical consciousness. While such pedagogy may well serve the needs of third world nations beleaguered by centuries of dominion by colonialism, adapting them for use in the U.S. is touchy at best. Heaney agrees:

Participatory and democratic pedagogical practices might be adapted to American schools, but the critique of social and economic oppression linked with collective action for social change creates dissonance, destroying the neutrality of the schools and unmasking their complicity in maintaining the economic and political imbalance of the social order (Heaney 7).

It's not that I disagree with Freire's "greater humanity" vision, for I know it to be noble to its core. It's just that the whole of Freirean pedagogy is summed up in his passage on the previous page leaving one to hunger for less Marxism and, well, more Elizabeth Bishop. Her long, lyrical poem, "The Fish," in which she magnificently describes the imagined persona of her finned victim, offers a very nice metaphor for conscious acts of liberation:

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Like medals with their ribbons  
frayed and wavering,  
a five-haired beard of wisdom  
trailing from his aching jaw.  
I stared and stared  
and victory filled up  
the little rented boat,  
from the pool of bilge  
where oil had spread a rainbow  
around the rusted engine  
to the bailer rusted orange,  
the sun-cracked thwarts,  
the oarlocks on their strings,  
the gunnels--until everything  
was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!  
And I let the fish go. (Bishop, 1638-40)

Given Friere's radical literacy proclivities, his idea of being literate is to be fully human, a being in full control of the direction of his/her personal political destiny. However, I would counter that to be fully human is to be in full control of the direction of your personal political destiny *and* enjoy the abundant beauty and diversity offered by *all* social classes, yes, even those of the oppressor. Should one, for example, refuse to attend an art exhibit of John Singer-Sargent because he painted the aristocracy of his day? Or, can one put aside the stigmatization of class and delight in the brilliance of "Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose" (1885-86), a technical masterpiece of children mesmerized by the glow of their paper lanterns in the velvety darkness of their private garden? Are we so cynical as to fear we would covet that private garden or might we wrap our arms around the sheer beauty that may well be divinely inspired?

The argument for "greater literacy" in the classic sense may be the weak link in Freirean pedagogy. His "banking education" theory in which the teacher is viewed solely as one who "deposits" information into the empty "bank" of the student's mind fails partly in its self-imposed characterization that the teacher is the "enemy" when in fact, as in any other vocation in life, there are "good" teachers and "bad." The world of the teacher may well hold a plethora of ideas which offer endless possibility and hope for a disadvantaged child outside the realm of the student's world. It raises the question as to whether the simple act of not going beyond the confines of the world of an underclass child negates the fact that "other" worlds exist.

Relating Stull's "emancipatory composition" theory to Freirean pedagogy, Stull is quite right that "the 'process' movement in writing has tended to emphasize the doing to the exclusion of the knowing (Stull 123). Evolving as it did in post-secondary education in the 1970s separate from literature classes, the process method generally speaks to the mechanical, linear tasks of pre-writing, writing, editing, and revision largely without regard to the writer's world-view or expression thereof. Ironically, in America anyway, one could hypothesize that conscious acts *against* the act of knowing only serve to further alienate the already disenfranchised. It's inconsistent with Stull's claim that such groups need to learn the dominant language in their effort to change the dominant culture. Such were the tactics of W.E.B Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X elucidated in Stull's book, *Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden*.

This dialogue would be incomplete with a point about tolerance. While Malcolm X would have gladly moved to any island offered where he could live peacefully and without white culture, Martin

Luther King Jr. took the more heroic stance by articulating an Eden where white and black could live side by side and forge an America that belonged to all assimilated races. Many white people walked shoulder to shoulder with African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement; for example, the Kennedy's, who never knew abject poverty or prejudice nor pretended for a moment to divest themselves of their personal wealth.

Of course in the Freirean notion of Eden there would be no such class distinctions. But in the meantime, I would hope that Freirean disciples here in America would cast a discerning, but tolerant eye on those philanthropists who put their money where their mouth is. It is imperative that we all keep open minds and learn to see the good in every single human being.

Lastly, though, even those with the best and simplest of intentions for dealing with this issue are sometimes vulnerable. Elspeth Stuckey's ultimatum, "greater literacy or greater humanity," is itself deceiving. Take any reasonably intelligent person, from any walk of life, and offer them the choice of "greater literacy or greater humanity." Chances are high that they will choose the latter by sheer association of the word humanity with something innately good; while literacy is the more abstract and intellectual of the two choices and therefore less desirable. Stuckey's "either/or" question is ultimately flawed because it is structured with the markings of her bias. Her supposition perpetrates the notions of superiority where one faction must be declared the winner and the other the loser. This is hypocrisy. One's first inclination would be naturally to favor one as the "winner," even, perhaps, before thoroughly researching the material and forming an informed opinion.

To prevent any misunderstanding, I believe it is the duty of every person who cares about social justice to act in every way possible to erase the class line as well as the race line. However, the focus of this particular paper was not to laude the "best practices" of E.D. Hirsch and Paulo Freire, but to discuss the theoretical weaknesses in their individual pedagogies, and to actively participate in sorting the imperfections of our world. My overarching assessment is that the polarity between Hirsch and Freire symbolizes a "healthy" impasse, for one without the other would diminish the grandeur of each (3).

## Notes:

1. The phrase, "greater literacy or greater humanity" was penned by Elspeth Stuckey in her book, *The Violence of Literacy* (1991), which is widely referenced in Robert P. Yagelski's book, *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading Social Self* (2000). Yagelski pre-faces the book by saying that he was so moved by a lecture he attended of Stuckey's in 1993 that the ideas that surfaced from that "angry" book of hers motivated him to write a book of his own about literacy.
2. The reference to "the Fall" and "Eden", though normally drawn from Biblical sources was actually drawn, in this case, from Bradford Stull's *Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden: Du Bois, King, Malcolm X, and Emancipatory Composition* (1999). Stull does cite their Biblical reference and makes the case that original sin caused the fall of Eden and therefore the subsequent rise of Babel. Stull alludes to the current polarities in society and language, including the lack of "harmonious" dialogue along racial and ethnic lines, as the modern Babel. One of the functions of emancipatory composition, as Stull sees it, is to strive to recreate Eden lost.
3. Bradford Stull develops a play on the archetypical, or deep-seated polarities that exist in society between such key words as East/West, Occident/Orient, etc. Ponders Stull on the opening page of chapter three of *Amid the Fall, Dreaming of Eden*, "Does the Orient exist only so the Occident [...] can construct itself as different from it, as superior to it?" It was this idea in mind that caused me to see the dichotomy in Hirsch

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and Freire differently, as somehow each would *not* be as profound without the other therefore giving some positive basis to my contention that the so-called impasse between Hirsch and Freire was “healthy.”

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