

WHAT Students Read Matters More Than You Think

In today's standards-based education system, the main focus is on teaching skills rather than content. There's a prevalent idea that it matters less *what* students read just so long as they *are* reading.

But according to E.D. Hirsch, professor emeritus of education and humanities at the University of Virginia, that's bull.

Some of you may know Hirsch through his famous advocacy of "cultural literacy"—the idea that some amount of "shared, canonical knowledge is inherently necessary to a literate democracy," and that students in a particular culture should have common exposure to certain texts and concepts.

But what you might not know is how Hirsch arrived at that idea.

He [used to be](#) a firm believer in what's called "educational formalism," which holds "that any suitable materials of instruction can be used to teach the skills of reading and writing." It's a central dogma of the current education system.

Using this formalism as an axiom, he received a grant to research and develop a standardized method of evaluating students' writing. As an experiment, he had two large groups read well-written and poorly-written versions of a paper on a particular subject to test reading speed and comprehension. He expected in each case that students would do better with the well-written version than with the poorly-written version.

And that is indeed what happened... but only when the paper was on a subject familiar to the students. To Hirsch's surprise,

when the paper was on an unfamiliar subject (such as Hegel's Metaphysics or Ulysses Grant and Robert Lee), the results were counterintuitive: writing skill made no difference in ease of reading and comprehension.

Thus, Hirsch concluded that the content to which students have been exposed matters, a lot:

"Part of our skill in reading and in writing is skill not just with linguistic structures but with words. Words are not purely formal counters of language; they represent large underlying domains of content. Part of language skill is content skill... [I]mportant aspects of reading and writing skills are not transferable."

So, what are the implications of Hirsch's realization? I think it was nicely summarized by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." What a student reads provides him with the language, and thus the concepts, that he uses to look at and interpret the world. Conversely, the language and concepts to which he isn't exposed will remain largely incomprehensible to him.

A more particular example: In school, if a student's reading is largely comprised of material on race, multicultural issues, and social justice, then that will form a primary lens through which he views the world; that will be what he "understands." On the other hand, if a student doesn't read much on American history, its founding documents, and its roots in Western tradition, they won't really have much meaning for him when they're referenced in the news and current events.

And this is precisely one of Hirsch's concerns:

"In a literate society, culture and cultural literacy are nearly synonymous terms. American culture, always large and

heterogeneous, and increasingly lacking a common acculturative curriculum, is perhaps getting fragmented enough to lose its coherence as a culture.”

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