

THE FORUM

A Section Devoted to Learned Opinion

Abstract

The author examines the interpretations of the issue of "literacy" as they have appeared in scholarly and popular publications in recent years, and suggests that all too frequently both the definitions of the problem and the proposed solutions to it are based on naive and unsatisfactory premises. He argues that the problem goes far beyond the acquisition of "basic skills" and examines the principles of classical humanism as a source for a more appropriate answer.

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Humanism: A Definition of Literacy

More than a few of the basic assumptions of Western Civilization have been refuted by the mysterious priestcraft of the pedagogues. Consider, for example, the assumption that a perpetual motion machine is a practical impossibility. Unbeknownst to the rest of the academic world, pedagogues have perfected just such a machine in the pendulum of educational practice and theory. News of the discovery has not been deliberately suppressed. Rather, the gentle swing of this machine has tended to induce an hypnotic state not dissimilar to amnesia. It is for this reason, perhaps, that so few pedagogues are haunted by a sense of *deja vu* in encountering the plethora of "innovations" that characterize the profession.

As the pendulum quivers now at the end of one of its swings, the issue of literacy arises with all the novelty of the pyramids. The arguments are not different in substance from those dotting the educational landscape of history; they are merely fought with less refinement and less cultural sensitivity. It is perhaps one of the profession's great tragedies that so many of its practitioners are so little encumbered with an historical awareness. Such a situation ensures that the perspective brought to bear on contemporary issues will be one coloured almost exclusively by the crabbed conventional wisdom characterizing the existing position of the pendulum. A broader vision encompassing the pendulum's full swing is not available, and absent with it is the balanced perspective necessary for proper evaluation of ideas and practices. So it is that our problems as a profession probably lie less in the inherent quality of the ideas and practices in currency than in our inability to assess their implications and proper application.

So it is also that the contemporary controversies over the question of literacy are characteristically fought without definition of issues — and, more often than not, seemingly without *awareness* of issues. The onlooker can only see "ignorant armies clash by night", to use Matthew Arnold's image. A refusal to recognize that the very word 'literacy' has no self-evident meaning contributes mightily to the darkness of the night. In the case of much

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of the newspaper diatribes, for example, literacy seems to be defined as rudimentary mastery of the so-called "basic" skills of reading and writing to the extent required for "functioning effectively" in contemporary society (with the examples of the uses of such skills usually being of a rather trivial nature). While it is not clear whether these espousing guardians of literacy recognize the almost frightening complexity of the coding, filtering, and sundry analytic-synthetic apparatus that underlie the "simplest" reading and writing skills, we can agree, by any definition that these skills must be seen as "basic literacy". They represent a plateau propaedeutic to any subsequent intellectual growth, a common level that must be attained both by a Wittgenstein and by his less subtle fellow mortal whose literary endeavours may find their apex in the interpretation of a stop-sign. Their acquisition is hardly the issue.

The problem lies more in the trivial tasks imputed to literacy by these 'defenders'. In reviewing rather simple-mindedly various specific activities in modern living that require the 'basic skills', these defenders back themselves into a corner of accepting the naïve proposition that the acquisition of literacy skills should be in some direct relationship to the actual degree to which contemporary society calls upon such skills. When the argument is reduced to the level of the individual, the proposition can emerge that the less complex the projected need of such skills is, the less extensive the training in them needs to be. A simple extrapolation from this position would suggest that in an age of declining emphasis on reading beyond the level characterized by understanding written instructions (from culinary to cybernetic menus), the "basic literacy" as defined above will adequately equip our modern citizen.

This argument obtains, however, only as long as literacy is viewed as a skill used by an active mind. It does not obtain when one sees literacy from the perspective of classical humanism — as something that *is* the mind. From this perspective, consideration of the topic of literacy must be expanded to encompass the rather immodest task of "training for thinking" — the development of the rational capacities and the perspective in which those capacities will function. An example of the link between the development of "thinking" and literacy, may be seen in that elusive quality called logic. Most educators would probably agree that a capacity for logical thought is not endemic to the human condition; it is learned through the repeated undertaking of activities requiring the exercise of logic. Two things are apparent in this assumption. First, if logic is a learned skill, the quality of its attainment within the individual will reflect the quality of the learning exercises. Second, the character of the logical-thinking itself will reflect the character of the experiences through which it is learned (which is to say no more than that one's manner of thinking reflects his cultural milieu). These two corollaries lead to some rather interesting problems. There is some considerable (but not conclusive) weight to the progressive's argument that logic is not best learned by studying abstract subjects that purportedly develop a logical capacity. (To a large extent at least, geometry maintained its presence in the high school curriculum under that latter rationale.) Such exercises, the progressive argues, have no necessary transfer quality. One can perform wonders of logical analysis on an geometry test but subsequently tackle life's problems with a totally illogical approach. The answer, then, for the progressive, has been to acquire the *habit* of logic by learning the subject incidentally to working out problems requiring a logical approach to "real life" situations. This approach, if employed properly, would no doubt inculcate "common sense" logic in a superior fashion; and to this extent one can comfortably embrace the progressive stance. But is something missing? By what criteria is our logical virtuoso to decide how to act on the conclusions wrought through

the problem-solving exercise? By a weighing of the consequences of the various options that present themselves, saith the progressive. While this response seems to provide a happy resolution — clear-thinking scientific navigation will bring us to a reasonable port — the question is only begged. Weighing the consequences is a quasi-scientific approach that is a useful tool but a delusive guide. It does not provide basis for choice other than the values and perspective previously a part of the weigher. At most, it provides the means for a logical exercise of qualities not themselves based on logic and inexorably tied to the present.

The notion of being tied to the present — of conducting one's actions from the world view of contemporary society — is not, of course, greeted with universal anathema; indeed, it may be seen to be the orientation implied in some progressive¹ education (depending on the degree of cultural sensibility possessed by the progressive educator). What the notion eliminates, however, is one of the very things it purportedly fosters: the ability to be critical of that world-view. To have that latter ability, one must first be aware that what one has is a world-view. Learning solely through the agency of contemporary life, while 'effective' in one sense, can at the same time lead to the dangerous state referred to by Alfred North Whitehead as "minds unable to divine their own unspoken limitations". Again, then, the substance that we can term 'cultural literacy' is, like 'basic literacy', not something that is simply *used* by an active mind. It is, in the same sense as is 'basic literacy', *the mind itself*. The failure to understand this accounts for the naïve progressive assumption that 'knowledge' can be picked up piece-meal as the need arises. To be able to think in such terms demonstrates the curious ability to separate mind as process and mind as content. It is a strange cybernetic view of the mind that is one of the less enlightening residues of the Age of Enlightenment.

It is to the concern for genuine literacy that the educational movement called humanism addresses itself; and it is as a result of this concern for literacy that humanism wages battle against progressivism. For it sees literacy not simply in terms of 'life-preparation' (when 'life' is defined in narrow utilitarian terms) but as something fundamental to the very *raison d'être* of education itself — the development of free minds. In so doing, the Humanist (under the twentieth century pen name of 'Traditionalist') promotes a pedagogy that on the surface looks anything but 'liberating'. Ironically, the progressive *attack* on humanism, which began in the latter third of the nineteenth century, has itself been conducted under the banner or "freedom".

By what alchemy, then does the humanist convert the dross of schooling to the gold of genuine freedom? To begin with, he denies the sacred bull of twentieth century pedagogy — the right of the student to a determining voice in the content of his education. This denial is based on the humanist's concept of literacy, which he — probably quite correctly — assumes the child will not pursue of his own volition. 'Basic literacy', as defined above, may be obtainable through activities to which the child voluntarily subscribes, and in this area the humanist would be foolish to ignore the very effective progressive methodology; few would question its superiority to the nasty rote learning of Victorian vintage. But — says the humanist — the progressive errs in assuming that the same method can be employed through the remainder of the child's education. For the method implies a certain content, a content 'relevant' and 'interesting' (with the two words too frequently simply being mutually defining). Such a content, while desirable as an *aspect* of education, is far too delimiting as the totality.

To begin with, says the humanist, we must inculcate a cultural literacy. Quite 'simply',

this is an understanding of the world-view of contemporary society and a perception of it as a world-view. to this end, the study of Literature and History (both subsuming moral and social theory) can be used as a systematic cultural recapitulation — creating an understanding of the concepts, perspectives and questions that in a developmental pattern have determined the shape of the modern mind. It is these cultural common denominators that provide some hope for a satisfactory gel, particularly in an age of such complexity that the processes of informal enculturation² can be as miseducative as they are educative (witness the phenomenon of sub-cultures). Also provided, it is hoped, will be the tolerance and breadth of vision that come from the understanding that our own ideas, attitudes and values are not eternal verities but rather historical artifacts. (Humanism can be of either religious or secular persuasion; but in the case of the religious humanist, the assumption that there are eternal verities is tempered by an awareness that his particular interpretation of those verities is an historical artifact.) The question is a moot one of how temperance and tolerance can be possible without such an awareness — and of how such an awareness can be generated apart from some process of cultural recapitulation.

As a corollary of the need for such 'cultural common denominators' must be the rejection of the notion that literacy education can be in the modes suggested by some progressives: something tailored to the interests and backgrounds of the individual (witness the progressive as guardian of individual freedom in his fervent cry: "why is the fledgling automechanic being force-fed Shakespeare?; let him be reading some contemporary urban novels"); or something that can await maturation (again the guardian cries: 'let him take his science courses now; when he's older he'll probably develop a taste for reading'). These cries fall into the tendency already alluded to of separating mind into form and content. Paul Goodman in his *New Reformation*, (1970) brought out the fundamental observation that without a systematic induction into our cultural history, any literature of significance would be relatively meaningless to a student in later life. Such literature has several dimensions, which are discernible only to minds that have absorbed the concepts and perspectives that are the cultural common denominators. Without them, the experience of reading such literature may be compared to the ordinary Westerner attempting to read a Japanese classic in translation; the words are identifiable but the dimensions of meaning are not. Without such a personal experience, it is difficult for the educator to realize that something that he so readily comprehends can be to someone else incomprehensible. With that realization, however, comes an appreciation of just how very tenuous is our process of cultural transmission — and how close we are now to a severing of that link.

This position does not meet universal acclaim. The doctrinaire progressive will insist, as a matter of principle, that students should not be compelled into areas not in accordance with their interests and life-styles; the cynical educator (if that is not an oxymoron) will simply state that they *cannot* be. The humanist's answer to the first has already been suggested. Our civilization needs the sort of commonality and vision that humanism offers. The particular aspects of the program are, of course, not necessarily of innate interest to the individual, for they deal with a civilization that is not an expression of "natural" tendencies; indeed, the humanist will often insist that the process of genuine "civilizing" is, as much as anything, a pulling of the child *away* from his "natural" predilections. But the process does bring the individual to the quintessence of what his civilization is — and, in the eyes of the humanist, allows expression of the highest human qualities, intellectual, moral, aesthetic, physical and social. In this sense it is true 'liberation'. (This is, of course, a position; the "naturalist", linear descendent of Rousseau, can argue that the 'civilized' man is an artificial man and that

the truly free man is one who has been allowed to develop according to his natural predilections — whatever that may mean). But the humanist message is a clear one — true freedom must be prefaced by a voluntary bondage. The result is something to the benefit of society and individual (with the latter only fully appreciating that benefit upon completion of his education) — but it is something for which very few would voluntarily opt.

How is the cynic to be addressed? To begin with, it is rather unfair to suggest that a common humanist education is impossible because students would never respond to a schooling of the character of the by-gone Secondary vintage. Of course they would not. But this is a criticism of a type of school, not of humanism per se. With the exception of a very few private ventures, a truly good model of a humanist school to serve all levels of society has yet to be realized. The “traditionalist” school — which was at the middle of this century still attempting to ignore its death knell (actually, it had a rather lengthy history of hearing difficulty) — was clearly elitist and more often than not intellectually debilitating and genuinely irrelevant; its dismissal was not without justification.

If it can be agreed, then, that to dismiss out-of-hand something never really attempted is somewhat precipitous, consideration may be given to the development of a common humanist curriculum. It is difficult to imagine anything being more ‘relevant’ or ‘practical’ than an examination of the human condition; and it is difficult to imagine the great works of our cultural heritage being considered ‘uninteresting’ if they are effectively oriented toward that focus. Impractical, irrelevant and uninteresting they can and have been when considered without such a focus.

What is the “human condition” of which the humanist speaks? In very broad terms, it can deal with questions such as how the individual can live to his highest human potentials (and give some awareness of what those potentials might be); the nature of his religion and morality and the complexity of decision-making in those areas; “his responsibilities as a citizen and his relationships as an individual to his society and to the state (and again the complexity of decision-making in those areas); and man’s relation to his physical world and the cosmos. It is toward such an understanding that the great works of literature, history, philosophy and science have been directed, and this common focus affords an opportunity to restore a unity to the now disparate elements of human inquiry. Through this unity the individual can come to a genuine understanding of himself, his society and his world. This, then, is cultural literacy.

Certain ancillary benefits of humanist education are worthy of notice. Of particular significance for the educator concerned with the study of literature is the contribution humanism makes to the ‘discussions’ now in vogue on the subject of teaching for creativity and mental discipline. Here again one must make a fundamental decision in principle between two basic positions. The ‘naturalist’ will argue variations of the theme that creativity must be based on unfiltered expression of ‘inner impulses’, with form developing in consequence of interaction with ‘external realities’. Similarly, he will add, self discipline should not be in the form of habits inculcated prior to ‘real life’, ‘problem-solving’ activities; it should rather develop in such activity, as the child discovers, through his experience, what types of behaviour and attitudes are necessary conditions to his achieving the goals he sets for himself.

Once again, the opposition the humanist will direct toward the progressive’s position will be based not on the intrinsic validity of the progressive ideas, but on the nature and extent of their application. For the humanist the purpose of self-expression (creativity) must first be

defined. Various goals suggest themselves: the pedagogical benefits of learning through experience; the investing of learning with interest; the encouragement of independent thought without cloying deference to authority; the ability to organize experience in some logical fashion and to articulate that organization in a fashion ensuring receipt in reasonably identical form by any listener. (The skill has, of course, a converse one of being able to "receive" such articulation). The first two goals suggest a general approach that the humanist would feel could be satisfied by his curriculum as well; the third goal begs the question of when such independent thought is legitimate; the final goal is not one for which contemporary progressive education receives universal acclaim.

In addressing this latter concern, the humanist refuses to draw a distinction between disciplined thought and creative self-expression (whereas much of progressive educational thought seems bent on seeing the two as separate realms in kind). To explain his position, the humanist will attempt to draw a parallel between discipline and creativity in verbal expression and similar qualities in the other arts. We can see, in examining the state of the art of music or painting, says the humanist, that the highest examples of creative self-expression have followed prior mastery of established modes of expression. In point of fact, the artist-to-be has spent years *copying* and *imitating* those existing modes. In time these modes become, in effect, internalized as second nature. It is then on the basis of this mastery and through it that truly creative and original self-expression has emerged. Again there is the basic humanist irony that true freedom must be preceded by apparent bondage.

The application of this principle to the study of literature and its Siamese twin, composition (now transmuted in Procrustean manner to "Expressive Arts") is an interesting prospect. In his historical manifestations, the humanist has employed the principle of internalizing "modes of expression" by quite blatant imitation of forms of analysis and synthesis in the examining of problems. Indeed, the classical disputation of the reformation (and for that matter, the medieval scholastic argument) may seem trivial in content but to dismiss them on that basis is to miss their point. In order to demonstrate a competence in such argumentation (which was the fundamental criterion for 'graduation') a student had to be able to take a theoretical proposition for which he was not specifically prepared (a proposition comparable in nature to the fundamental issues upon which we expect today's student to come to some position) and be able to explore fully its ramifications. He had to be able to examine its validity from all relevant avenues of inquiry; he had to be able to present evidence to support his position and be able to defend that evidence; he had to be able to handle all argumentation directed against his position and assess the validity of the evidence used against it.

It is difficult to imagine a better training for a world in which the individual is compelled daily to take stands on complex and ambiguous issues. The approach requires one to be logical and thorough in establishing one's stance, for it makes the all-important provision for valid dialogue — someone with similar skills is able to ensure that your position is not one of careless conventional wisdom. It is with some strength that the humanist can ask whether the progressives provide a satisfactory alternative for valid decision-making. Certainly the contemporary "social sciences" approach to training in decision-making, especially in the area of values, demonstrates serious weaknesses when viewed from the humanist's perspective. The social sciences' self-deluding myth of value-free objectivity has been more than adequately explored in recent years; so also has been their dangerous tendency to ignore their parameters of competence. The talent of the social sciences to ferret out and organize fact is appreciated. What is not is their tendency to feel that the same

training that afforded that talent equips the wielder to make what John Stuart Mill would call "policy decisions". Again we are faced with a good thing either misapplied or over-applied. What emerges from the dilemma is a fuller understanding of why the humanist has insisted that 'skill training' (into which category must fall both automechanics and the social sciences) must be preceded (or followed) by 'liberal education'. If the age of progressive education can be seen to have one major flaw, it is in its ignoring of this relationship. What has been defined above as "cultural literacy" is, for the humanist, the only valid basis upon which judgment on the use of facts and the application of skills can be made.

It is for this reason that the humanist will vehemently dismiss the notion that "liberal education" can be restricted to the relatively small group which, because of temperament and background, is "suited" to it. If the ordinary person is to live a life that allows the fullest realization of his potential as a human being, that prepares him for immersion into the mainstream of our cultural heritage, that equips him for genuine decision-making on fundamental social and moral questions, and that, above all, makes possible a genuine community — then that person must receive a humanistic education. Among others, Robert Maynard Hutchins has insisted that it is not unrealistic to expect every normal child to undertake such an education. Certainly this is not the path of least resistance and certainly it reflects, to some extent at least, a reversion to paternalism and coercion. Such a curriculum could never be easy. To suggest that it could be is to ignore the complexity of our civilization's history and present state; to attempt to make it so would be to offer an education that really did not equip the student to understand his world as it truly is. But surely it is not beyond the capacities of modern pedagogy to make *interesting* a curriculum which in its essence is a study of the human condition.