

actors materialize through performance may be a better way to lead students to critical awareness of the medium.

And on the subject of case studies, we might benefit from one on the professional television writer. It is he or she who is likely to tell us what, if anything, can be transferred from writing for television to writing for print.

While we await such scholarship, one can only hope that Mano's article will not find its way to the desk of a television executive at one of our Los Angeles stations. For he—and it is almost invariably he—will delight in having found an academic rationalization for his commercial enterprise. He will no doubt schedule a "surprising" revelatory report for the eleven o'clock news during the next ratings sweep period. Of course Mano should not object if the results of her two-year study are truncated to two minutes and cut into suitably appealing sound bites. Such is the fate of those who have gone over to the "enemy."

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It should not be injudicious of me to point to colleagues who on the one hand reject Hirsch and on the other bemoan the cultural literacy of their students. The Spring 1987 Freshman Composition final exam at the University of Southern California called upon students to consider the issue of U.S. Presidential ethics. I talked to no colleague who was confident that his/her students knew enough to produce a literate response.

<sup>2</sup>See Hershel Parker, *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction* (Evanston, Northwestern, 1984) for a strenuous defense of Hirsch on the grounds that Hirsch's theory concerning authorial intention is essential to the scholarly editor. Parker himself is the Norton editor of Herman Melville. Parker's book is useful if only for one of the very few sympathetic readings of Hirsch. Parker also offers a reasoned and thorough review of post-modern composition theory as it impinges on editorial practice.

<sup>3</sup>For a report and discussion of the results see Keith Henderson, "Children, TV, and Creativity: Can They Mix?" *The Christian Science Monitor* 20 April 1987: 29-30. The four control groups in order of their creativity scores: 1.) Children who watched no television and interacted with an adult. 2.) Children who watched the Rogers show with an adult. 3.) Children who watched the Rogers show alone. 4.) Children left to play by themselves.

<sup>4</sup>The study has been published as a book. See Tannis MacBeth Williams, *The Impact of Television: A Natural Experiment in Three Communities* (New York: Academic Press, 1985).

<sup>5</sup>See Smith's introduction to *Awakening to Literacy* (Exeter, N.H.: Heinemann, 1984) v. Smith states, "Whatever I might still feel about the value of literacy personally, I can no longer regard the benefit of its acquisition as axiomatic." I applaud Smith's willingness to be self-critical of his own values, though I have met no adult illiterates who do not desperately want to read and write. Smith is fortunate that his own literacy is what enables him to articulate and examine his own values.

<sup>6</sup>Far from devaluing literacy, television has always sanctimoniously supported literacy and reading programs. Ubiquitous public service announcements and such continuing features as the CBS "Read All About It" series are cases in point. Recently the major networks pledged their commitment to a major drive to support adult literacy programs. If television isn't attacking literacy, who in our culture is?

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## FLUX: THE SHIFTING ROLE OF THE COMPOSITION TEACHER

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I was a farmer by birth, as was my father. We came from generations of farmers who toiled in the sun to glean the often meager living the earth afforded. Farming, the actual work of preparing land, sowing seed, caring for a crop through unpredictable spring weather and summer heat, and then trying to harvest it in the fall before the rain and wind ruined the year's work, can dissipate the strength and break the will of the heartiest individual. The physical labor takes a toll on the body, and the anxiety of such a huge investment exposed to the forces of capricious nature preys on the mind. This is the most visible side of farming, the one concerned with survival, of lasting through the current year and hoping that the next one will be more forgiving. But farming has another side, a capacity for revitalizing the dispirited, a potential for rejuvenation seemingly unconnected to the mundane, day-to-day tedium of working the fields. What gives farming this hidden value is the sense of universal proprietorship, a kind of mutual holding of the land and its potential for life in trust that one acquires when he works closely with nature.

And here is the most important lesson my father taught me about his profession. For him the greatest reward from tilling the soil came not at the end of the year when he harvested his cotton and soybeans, selling them for what was seldom enough to cover the expenses incurred over seasons of unpredictable cold snaps, rain storms, and dry, dusty Augusts. For my Dad the true value of farming had little to do with tangible gain but came from a sense of personal worth he received from participating in a process larger than himself, because he was part of an immense, perpetually enduring cycle in a very personal way. A farmer functions as protector of and in communion with nature in its broadest context. His province is the nurturing of life.

Teaching composition parallels closely the process the farmer follows to prepare for his crop, for the magic of life that springs from the seeds he plants. By plowing his soil, forming a seedbed, and waiting until the time and conditions in the field are just right to receive the seed, the farmer does all he can to insure that the process on which he depends will begin anew each year. As composition teachers, we, too, attempt to prepare as carefully as possible by creating an environment in which the process of writing can flourish. Like the farmer, we have no guarantees, no real control over the changing conditions that might ruin our crop at any time. We can only hope that once our seeds are planted the magic will somehow happen again.

When I left farming and entered graduate school, I found that what my father had taught me about farming applied to my new job as a teacher of freshman composition. The sense of worth derived from farming parallels that found by those teachers truly dedicated to helping freshmen learn. In many ways the farmer's physical work of nurturing life in the field is inextricably tied to his reward because his labor contributes to the greater cycle of life. Likewise, the composition teacher's goals and rewards are bound together if he or she is truly concerned with helping students become literate, independent thinkers, and not just with imposing on them a set of preconceived standards. Our province is the nurturing of potential. Like the farmer whose careful planting, watering, weeding, and eventual harvesting of his crop helps insure not only his financial survival, but his personal fulfillment as well, the concerned teacher's informed and sensitive application of pedagogy allows the individual student to flourish and in turn contributes to the teacher's own sense of accomplishment.

Insights into teaching, like those in farming, are best revealed through experience. What I have discovered about the field of freshman composition is that, for anyone who actively seeks to teach freshmen to write, helpful pedagogy is in a constant state of flux, and that this flow of contemporary ideas often takes tangential and in many cases opposite directions to established, more traditional methods of teaching. And even where pedagogical theories may seem a helpful foundation on which to build a personal teaching strategy, they can only suggest guidelines, broad, rough frameworks, over which each teacher must stretch the fabric of his or her own style, molding and shaping the pedagogy until it takes on that teacher's unique features. Seen in this context, it is quite often the pedagogue and not the pedagogy that matters most in the classroom.

Too often beginning teachers become jaded or burned out because the methods they were taught and those they are expected to use instructing freshmen are out of sync with the way they, as writers, create their own compositions. Textbooks as well as suggested departmental syllabi often advocate a linear movement from word, sentence, paragraph, essay and prescribe writing tasks with the same lack of awareness of the writing process. I faced this problem my first semester as a graduate teaching assistant. The syllabus supplied from my English department required a research paper in the course and included a suggested timetable for students to dutifully complete each step in the "process" of "writing" the paper. Bewildered by such supposed organization in the process of writing, I made an honest effort to use this syllabus with its exhortations to collect bibliographic cards, outlines, and note cards. Then, I gave up. Never having written a paper with such things, I had no idea how to teach someone else to do it. The only time I had ever written a formal outline or note cards had been for my freshman English instructor, and those I wrote after finishing the paper—

because I was required to turn them in as evidence of work completed in preparation to writing.

For my inability to teach "the term paper" the way it "should" be taught, the "correct" way, I felt like a failure, a traitor to the ranks of "real" English teachers. Had anyone suggested to me that there is no fixed method, no "right" way, to teach freshman composition the anxiety I experienced could have been greatly alleviated. Surely, my case is not an isolated instance of ignorance or inability. What I needed was not a prescribed, unbending syllabus, but enough exposure to current trends in composition pedagogy to have some awareness that no one teaching method is the only acceptable way to teach writing.

Now I know better how to deal with the incongruities between suggested methodologies and the way writers write. I have learned that vigilance and flexibility in teaching help my students most. I must allow learning to take place by having the judgment not to interfere while the process is working smoothly, but be aware of what my students are experiencing and the difficulties they face to more successfully act as a support when demands threaten to overwhelm them. Like the farmer who stays in touch with a crop by walking the fields through the mud or the dust to experience the choking weeds and entangling vines that threaten what he has so tenderly nurtured, the teacher must have the wisdom to know when circumstances require him to sometimes advise, sometimes correct, or sometimes only watch the burgeoning crop. This is a difficult thing to learn. Nurturing students is so often a matter of timing.

Metaphors abound to explain this concept. For Peter Elbow the teacher becomes a coach, an ally, who encourages students to take risks, to deform themselves and their material alike in order to experience the "violence" and exhilaration of learning (331). Carolyn Matalene encourages the teacher to become an editor in the most professional sense of the word, giving support or censure to student writers, depending on which one she deems necessary in a particular situation (4). Nancy Sommers, taking her lead from Knoblauch and Brannon, warns teachers not to become appropriators of a student text by forcing it to conform to any preconceptions the teacher might have, but to listen to the student's voice in each text and to focus on what the student, not the teacher, is trying to say (149). Donald Murray emphasizes that before students can be introduced to the finer points of critical thinking they must first confront questions of content, meaning, or focus in their compositions. Only then can they, as writers, begin to make significant decisions about language and clarity of expression ("Teaching" 145). He sees himself as a wilderness guide "who doesn't lead so much as stand behind the young explorer, pointing out alternatives only at the moment of panic" ("Teaching" 142).

All of these writers, I believe, are pursuing the same thing. In attempting to demonstrate a concern for the student writer as an individual whose thoughts and perceptions have validity, they are also reserving a significant role for the teacher, one that is less certain than in the traditional teacher-student relationship and, at the same time, more exacting because of its lack of structure. But this new role for the teacher need not seem threatening. Once a teacher accepts this extension of the traditional view of his or her job, the current emphasis on post-structuralism meshes with pedagogy and translates into informed writing instruction, obligating each composition teacher to meet students on a common ground, to aid them in what Ann Berthoff calls the "making of meaning," to show them that the act of composing is "the work of an active mind and is thus within their natural capacity" (*Meaning* 67). Doing this implies a com-

mitment by the teacher to plastic methods, to tailoring teaching practices for the individual student in so far as that is possible.

Jay Robinson delineates this new direction for teaching composition by describing the attitude he brings to his own writing class:

When I teach a composition class, I must remember that my cultural frames are not my students' or theirs mine. I must remember that their experiences are neither mine, nor something I want to appropriate by investing them with my meanings. And yet, I want them to learn; and yes, I want to work with them toward common meanings, meanings that we can share, meanings that will make possible the possibility of a common language, a public discourse made of and constitutive both of self and community. (495)

Clearly, Robinson exhibits the influence of a directional shift in composition pedagogy. The thrust here is to empower the student, to locate and develop what Donald Murray calls "the other self," the ability in each student to discover his own hidden potential for creating and evaluating a personal text. No longer does the traditional model of all-knowing teacher and ignorant student dominate the classroom. The role of teacher and that of student are both redefined.

What Robinson proposes is a compromise between theorists concerned with defining composition as solely a mode of thinking, of making sense of the world, and practitioners who regard composition mainly as a mode of communication. In the freshman classroom, space for both these concepts exists. For any instructor concerned with maintaining the student at the center of the curriculum, Robinson's concern for allowing students to make their own meaning while at the same time working for a common language suggests a difficult but challenging role for the student and the teacher. In a Robinson styled classroom the emphasis would be twofold: first, to help each student find within himself or herself the potential for making sense of the world; second, to enable that student to communicate individual perceptions and thoughts in a way that will be readily understood and appreciated in the broader discourse of the university. In short, Robinson is suggesting that we as teachers of composition need to allow our students the liberty of individual expression so long as that expression remains grounded in literacy and critical thinking.

But, by the use of the term literacy I do not mean to imply that upon first entering the composition classroom all or even most students can be considered literate, with the ability to think critically. The desired goal is the development of the kind of literacy defined by Robinson as "an outcome, not a skill, and not (even) a competency. It is something that is achieved when competencies are enabled through exercise of the human capacity to make meaning" (485). The composition classroom is a place to nurture literacy, not to find it full grown.

Literacy comes to students at different speeds; some may not acquire it at all. And for those to whom it does come, it is not necessary for them to be aware of their gain. They can learn the application of an intellectual process without insight into the process itself. Often such insight arrives with sudden and unpredictable impact, the burst of light aptly named "allatonceness" by Ann Berthoff. This, I believe, is what Robinson means when he calls literacy an "outcome," the culmination of energizing the various, subtle capacities involved in moving a student from writer to critical thinker, from emulator to creator.

This new model for the composition teacher does not imply a rejection of the traditional evaluative function of teaching, but it suggests that this role be fulfilled with compassion and insight, attune to the individual student as the focus of the composition process. Peter Elbow has some useful insights into the dual and seemingly conflicting duties of teacher as both facilitator and evaluator. He contends that a good teacher, one concerned with student learning, must function unflinchingly in both capacities, and he offers as examples worthy of emulation the teaching methods of Socrates and Christ, the "archetypal good teachers—archetypal in being paradoxical." Elbow credits them with doing violence to what they taught in order to get their message across while at the same time insisting that "learners bend and transform themselves in order to become fit receptacles" for what they had to impart (333).

The formula Elbow recommends for this implies a dichotomy in the role of teacher. He suggests that as a facilitator a teacher should:

1. assume students are intelligent and capable
2. let them know you are on their side by "showing them that the perplexity or ignorance they reveal . . . will not be used against them in tests, grading, or certifying."
3. take the stance of advocate in support of the student regardless of how outrageously that student might have violated your trust in the past.
4. demonstrate that you too are still learning, having doubts, seeking help, and needing support, that you are open to new ideas, because neither you nor they have all the answers (332).

For the role of evaluator Elbow also proposes four techniques:

1. insist on standards that are high in the sense of demonstrating that there exists "a 'real world' of truth, of good reasoning, of good writing. . . ."
2. approach all student performance with a critical eye in an attempt to reveal those students who either cannot or will not learn.
3. refuse to become attached to students, to assume their sensibilities, their viewpoints.
4. identify yourself with the culture and the academy and not with the students you teach (333).

For Elbow the key to putting these two roles into practice is to clearly delineate his evaluative persona at the beginning of the semester and each time he makes an assignment. Otherwise, the persona of friend, advisor, and facilitator has precedence. By allowing students to realize that the teacher does have two jobs, but that they can and will be separated at different phases of the course, both the students and the teachers are spared some of the trauma of dealing with seemingly split and opposing teacher obligations.

My own search through the flow of pedagogical ideas has taken my classroom through several metamorphoses. When I began teaching, I lectured because I thought that was the way a teacher taught. That changed because it seemed I could not talk my students into a good essay. After trying various other methods—peer evaluation, short in-class assignments, rough draft workshops in which I tried to read all their drafts at one succession—I started having conferences with individual students, one-on-one. This method seems to produce the best writing from my students and enables me to apply Elbow's ideas of a dual teaching role directly and personally to each writer. In these face-to-face

meetings, I get to know the individuals I am dealing with on a level not possible in a classroom situation. And although these sessions do not last as long as a class period, usually 10-15 minutes, the results I have seen have convinced me that I may be on the right track.

In these conferences I try to adopt the techniques proposed by Donald Murray who suggests teaching less and giving up some controls over the student and his text in an effort to allow the student to learn more. Murray believes that by supplying the appropriate questions about a draft at the right time a teacher can motivate, not intimidate, a student into better writing ("Listening Eye" 14). He offers six questions for the teacher to pose and for the student to consider as a prompt to future drafts:

1. What did you learn from this piece of writing?
2. What do you intend to do in the next draft?
3. What surprised you in the draft?
4. Where is this piece of writing taking you?
5. What do you like best in this piece of writing?
6. What questions do you have of me? ("Listening Eye" 15)

These questions, or variations of them, work primarily because they put emphasis on the student's writing and do not allow the conference to become too teacher oriented.

Of course, a student too eager for approval, or unsure of what role he is expected to play in a conference setting, can often return with a second draft and say that he now has a much better paper because all the changes I suggested have been made. When this happens I know I have failed for the present in reaching this writer, in helping him discover the "other self" and become a thinker and not just an emulator. But even this failure is a sign of progress. At least the second or third draft exists, and we have something to work with. Then, at other times a student will leave a conference with a parting comment suggesting that on the next draft he will "figure me out," as if a certain combination exists, and as soon as he finds it, he will crack this thing called composition. When this happens I always feel that I have had a small success, that at least for the present I have dodged the bullet of figurability.

Conference teaching has two distinct advantages over the methods I formerly employed and for these reasons alone it is a viable alternative to the traditional classroom situation. First, my students are producing multiple drafts, drafts that I have the chance to see take shape. Conferences make it possible for me to see writing in progress more than I ever did in the classroom where because of time limitations I could only get a general idea of how each paper was progressing. Second, conferences allow each student to move at his or her own speed, providing a way for more advanced writers to stretch the limits and not be bound by the constraints of a class that may not be up to their level. And conferences enable weaker students to receive the special attention they need in a situation more personal and direct than the classroom. Often knowing a teacher is interested in them not just as writers but as individuals sparks these students to put forth the effort necessary to achieve far greater gains than they ever thought themselves capable. For students with less enthusiasm, conferences bring them face to face with a teacher and require of them more than minimal effort. In the typical classroom setting these students are often ignored by teachers whose time restrictions may prompt them to take a greater interest in their classmates who show more enthusiasm.

This system is not perfect, however, at least not the way I have been able to implement it. Some students still slip through, as

they always will, and do not perform up to the hoped for standards. I view this as a fault of the conference method of teaching that puts the burden of learning on the student. It requires a certain amount of maturity that some have not attained. Another limitation of this system is the lack of perspective the students are allowed in appraising their writing. I have found that at times having another student read over a paper and confront the writer with a vague sentence or an awkward phrase is far more productive than my doing it from what is usually perceived as an adversary point of view. In a conference this, of course, is a difficult situation to arrange. The only way I have been able to do it effectively is to schedule a group of students to come for conferences at the same time and use those waiting their turns as my readers. This small group situation furnishes a pool of readers that can be beneficial in reaffirming or rejecting any particularly critical comments I might make about a paper. The limitations of this are the same as with other peer evaluations, however, in that the whole process depends on abilities and attitudes of the readers.

Overall, though, I have been more satisfied with the conference system than any other method I have tried. The most satisfying aspect is watching as my students grapple with the writing process and feeling that I have a real input into their attempts to work through the problems they face as writers. There is a more practical consideration, however. This method allows me to read through and evaluate papers holistically and eliminates the need for so many written comments. By encouraging successive drafts to be turned in for a grade at any time, the pressure of grading a complete set of papers at any one time is alleviated because the papers do not all come in at once. In this respect the work load is not lessened, but it is spread over the entire semester and the work required seems not so monumental as grading an entire set of papers often does.

In the future I would like to try a couple of techniques that might enhance my conference teaching, or at least alter it somewhat. I believe that the use of portfolio grading might lend itself naturally to the conference system; indeed, even though I now give a set number of assignments, by requiring successive drafts and by not accepting any paper until the student and I both feel it is ready for a grade, I have created a portfolio situation without calling it such. Something else I would like to try if the facilities were available is to have students save their work on computer disks and grade for grammar and mechanics by computer with some sort of style checker. This could differentiate for the student the job of editing from that of revision. It would also let conference time be spent more productively than if we allowed ourselves to become bogged down in error correction.

But these are problems for next semester or next year. Or perhaps I will change my methods, completely abandon conferences, and again enter the flux of ideas swirling around me, hoping as every time before, this time to grab and hold the "right" one. And I know before I start that I am fortunately doomed to failure, understanding that I can never reach closure with pedagogy because each situation offers different circumstances and suggests a new approach. Another year may require a different set of methods, a new design for success.

As I write this I know it is not exactly what I want to say about teaching. My ideas remain romantic and fluid. I feel like Faulkner must have when asked to justify his style. He claimed that he wanted to say everything worth saying in one sentence. Failing to do so in one sentence, he attempted the same thing in one book—book after book. Teaching composition is like that, an addictive endeavor. There is no end. Like Faulkner, I will keep

on trying to get it right and knowing that I never will. Faulkner, himself a farmer, knew that the end never comes, the answer remains elusive but that the value of his endeavor was in the attempt. The beauty, the worth, in teaching and in farming comes from personal fulfillment.

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## BLOOM, HIRSCH, AND BARTHES IN THE CLASSROOM: NEGOTIATING CULTURAL LITERACY

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In describing the current state of education, E. D. Hirsch, Jr., notes a decline of interpretative reading skills among students, supporting his claim with references to various commissions and reports (*Cultural Literacy* 27, 219). Teachers of introductory college literature courses were scarcely surprised. For some time we have complained of the passivity of our students. "In this consumer-oriented age of instant gratification, people don't really read any more," we often say; "they just look at the words." Their papers we find equally unsatisfactory, often merely summaries of plot or of lecture material. For their part, students are puzzled by what we do in class. Hesitating, a few appear after class. "I really read the assignment," they begin apologetically, "but I didn't see any of that stuff you were talking about." Others approach more defensively, their papers still warm with red-inked invective against plot summary and imprecise diction: "I made an A in English last semester. Just what is it you want?"

This little vignette, common as it is, encapsulates one aspect of the current discussion of the literacy crisis. In this case, however, literacy refers not to the mere ability to read and write but to what Robert Pattison has described as an awareness of the uses and problems of language coupled with an ability "to express this consciousness in the ways evolved and sanctioned by the culture" in which a person lives (6). Their inability to interpret is akin to the failures of Pattison's "clown," who is "programmed to understand language only in its most literal form" and who "cannot adjust for context, tone, or nuance" (14).

The "clown" that Pattison describes, however, is supposed to be a literary creation, familiar only as a comic convention. What of those earnest students who dutifully read assignments and still come away from our lectures baffled? A real source of the problem lies, I think, in the term *reading*. Although we do not always say so explicitly, we want our students to reread a work of

literature and draw subtle inferences from it, to spot patterns of repetition, and to tease out ambiguities. The truth is that most people do not read in that way; indeed, it runs counter to the prevailing notion of reading. In the larger culture to which our students belong, reading is a valued skill for retrieving information stored in print. That information is expected to be wholly unambiguous, so that all readers will extract the same single meaning from a printed text. After that meaning has been correctly extracted, one returns to the words that encoded it only for utilitarian reasons. There is little need, for example, to reread a computer manual or the *Wall Street Journal* except to solve a particular problem or to predict a trend.

Students learn to read that way both outside and inside school. We measure the reading comprehension of younger students by seeing how much data they can decode and maintain in short-term memory. Students are taught to treat imaginative literature in the same way. They are asked to recall plots, describe characters as objectively as possible, identify figures of speech. When it is time to draw inferences from or otherwise interpret a story, they are told the single meaning of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or *Julius Caesar* and store it away until it is called for, probably on an exam. New information about other works may be added, of course, but one need not return to a text unless its meaning has for some reason slipped out of storage. Such an approach is not limited to primary and secondary school instruction. One need only look at such an influential work as Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation* to see how firmly it is entrenched in higher education as well. The long-powerful New Criticism also tended to posit a single best reading of a work, for the formal data of a piece of literature all pointed to a single best reading. The work might be reinterpreted on the basis of that data, but the new reading supplanted the incorrect old one.

The two most widely discussed recent books on the literacy crisis have tended to perpetuate this view of education as the accumulation and consumption of data. The metaphor of education as consumption (in a physical sense) is quite prominent in the opening section of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. In the preface, he comments that the essence of the craft of teaching is knowing both the "hungers" of the young and "what they can digest" (19). Later, rock music is described as "indigestible" (75) and its practitioners as "purveyors of junk food for the soul" (77). The metaphor is perhaps clearest in his approving summary of the "old Great Books conviction" that "the human desire to know is permanent, that all it really needs is the proper nourishment, and that education is merely putting the feast on the table" (51). Bloom repeatedly states that education should develop the whole person, but there is little sense that this well-fed intellect is developed by exercise. Curiously, then, despite his scree against the apathy of modern students, the student's preferred role in Bloom's view of education is also largely passive.

Likewise, Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* treats knowledge as discrete, unambiguous pieces of information to be presented for students to absorb. Acquisition of content is more important than skills: "Only by accumulating the shared symbols, and the shared information the symbols represent, can we learn to communicate effectively with one another in our national community" (xvii). For Hirsch, however, there is an immediate practical purpose for accumulating these symbols. The opening chapter of Hirsch's book makes it particularly clear that effective communication is a matter of economics. Hirsch quickly points out that only "highly literate societies can prosper economically"