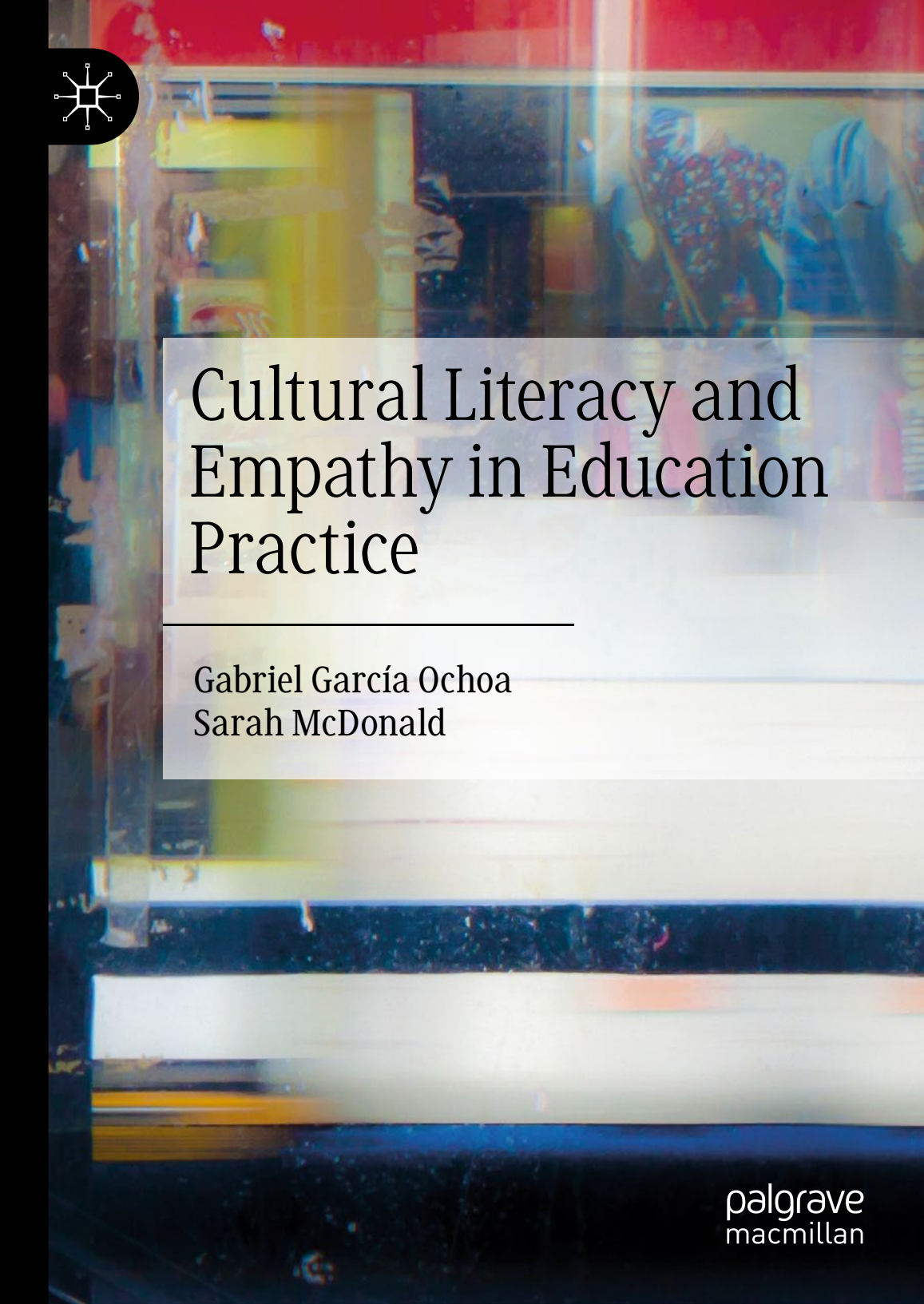

Cultural Literacy and Empathy in Education Practice

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ISBN 978-3-030-59903-4 ISBN 978-3-030-59904-1 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59904-1

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgements

It takes a village to write a book, in particular a book like this one. We started working on *What is Cultural Literacy?* in late 2017. Our belief then, as it is now, is that learning how to bridge differences across disciplines and cultures is key to addressing the great challenges that humanity faces. Throughout the journey of exploring and elaborating on this idea, raising awareness about it, and getting it to print, we have had the good fortune of collaborating with remarkable people, whose kindness and support have been crucial to the publication of this book. We would like to thank Shabnam Safa, Ema Stefanovic, Danielle Radivo, Ross Huggard, Emma Casey and Camille Murphy. Thank you for trusting us with your experience and your stories. None of this would have been possible without your goodwill and support. Many thanks to our colleagues at Monash University, in particular Dr Cathy Sell and Meaghan Harding. We are very grateful to the anonymous reviewers who provided constructive, useful suggestions that helped us better shape this book. Thanks to Dr Gwyn Fox for her kindness and attention to detail. To our students—past, present and future—this is for you and because of you; you teach us considerably more than you think! Many thanks to our editors at Palgrave, Camille Davies and Liam McLean for gently guiding us through the process of production. And last, but of course, by no means least, our deepest gratitude to our families, Mia, Pieter and Scott; at the risk of mixing metaphors, you are the pylons and hinges, motors and catalysts for everything we do.

Contents

CHAPTER 1

What Is Cultural Literacy?

We begin this study with a personal anecdote by one of the authors of this book:

> A few years ago I travelled to Antwerp for a conference. It was a long journey from Australia (as most journeys that start in Australia are wont to be, unless one is going to New Zealand). A 14-hour flight from Melbourne to Dubai, followed by a 4-hour layover; seven hours from Dubai to Amsterdam, a train ride from Amsterdam to Belgium, and then the taxi to the hotel. At this point you probably would forgive me for being tired, jet-lagged, and quite possibly, delusional.
>
> As most frequent travellers know, the best way to stave off jet-lag is *not* to give in to sleep, no matter how tempting. So, after dropping off my bags and taking a shower I went for a walk. Strolling around a new city is usually exciting enough to keep me awake, but I got lost looking at the fold-out map, trying to find the Rubens Museum. Instead, I found myself in one of the busiest shopping strips in Antwerp, before a storefront that announced itself as a proud purveyor of "Australian Home Made Ice Cream", no less.
>
> Intrigued, I went in. I was born and raised in Mexico, not Australia, but I had become a naturalised Australian a few years prior, after falling in love with the many wonders offered by the country, while fully unaware that ice cream was one of them. I was greeted by a smiling shop attendant. Somehow, we managed to strike up a conversation in an unholy pidgin of French, Bengali, Dutch, Spanish and English. The attendant explained that he was

G. García Ochoa, S. McDonald, *Cultural Literacy and Empathy in Education Practice*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-59904-1_1

> half Belgian, half Indian. He grew up in Bengal, and halfway through his studies in dentistry he decided to become an engineer. He moved to Belgium to study for his engineering degree. On weekends he worked at this shop, making the authentic, Australian ice cream he had just sold to the Mexican-Australian. In Antwerp.

The most remarkable element about this anecdote is that it is not remarkable at all. With increasing frequency we come across colleagues or acquaintances with cultural or disciplinary backgrounds that may be completely different from our own, people who hail from the most remote corners of the Earth (e.g. Australia), for whom one's well-known, perfectly "normal" turf may seem entirely unfamiliar. The skills, knowledge and abilities involved in understanding and interpreting these differences, and learning how to approach them as potential sources of richness in intercultural and interdisciplinary collaborations, is what we refer to as cultural literacy, which is the main subject of this book.

1.1 The Origins of "Cultural Literacy"

The term cultural literacy is not new, and it is important to establish where we stand in relation to previous approaches. E. D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy*, published in 1989, became the topic of much debate in education. Even though the term "culture wars" would not be popularised until 1991, with the publication of James Davison Hunter's influential book, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, the "war of cultures" was already being waged in the United States, and Hirsch's book was fresh ammunition, particularly after his ideas were championed by Dr William Bennett, Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education during the president's second administration. This was a dubious honour for Hirsch, a self-professed progressive (Hirsch 2015).

Hirsch's purported progressiveness, however, is often obtuse in his writings. *Cultural Literacy* opens by identifying a major problem in the American education system: literacy rates, which had been rising in the "developed world" in the 1980s, had plateaued in the United States. According to Hirsch, there was a direct relationship between the lack of growth in the number of literate Americans and the concepts that schoolchildren were being taught in school. He argued that if schools taught important knowledge that is central to national culture, this would result not only in higher literacy rates, but an increase in students' ability to learn

across every subject. Their capacity to contextualise would be enhanced, which would in turn allow students to learn new information and knowledge with greater ease (Hirsch 1989b, 456). Hirsch refers to this important core cultural knowledge as cultural literacy, which he defines alternatively as "a universally shared national vocabulary" and "the shared culture of the common reader" (1989b, 26, 36). It is the "background information" we possess, which allows us "to take up a newspaper and read it with an adequate level of comprehension, getting the point, grasping the implications" (1989a, 2). Simply put, linguistic literacy is dependent on, and directly related to this conceptual, cultural literacy.

This communal core knowledge, Hirsch argues, extends across every field and medium, including sports, science, arts, literature, film, television and classical and contemporary texts. It is often assumed that once they become linguistically literate, students will be able to grasp this basic cultural canon, but according to Hirsch, the evidence has proved the contrary, and consequently, pedagogical measures must be taken to address this problem. Due to this ignorance of core cultural concepts, schoolchildren have been unable to understand the basic workings of society, which poses long-term problems if they are to become its future leaders and custodians (Hirsch 1989a, 7). With an early interest in interdisciplinarity, Hirsch argued that cooperation between professionals from different disciplines and backgrounds was crucial for further social advancement, "If we do not achieve a literate society, the technicians, with their arcane specialties, will not be able to communicate with us nor us with them. That would contradict the basic principles of democracy, and must not be allowed to happen" (1989, 31) Hirsch was stressing the importance of being able to go beyond the boundaries of one's own discipline in order to engage in a dialogue with others. Like Hirsch, in this book we strongly support interdisciplinarity, but our approach is markedly different from his. As we shall discuss later on, instead of proposing a standardisation of knowledge, we propose a *modus operandi* of openness to different types of knowledge.

Hirsch repeatedly argues that increased cultural literacy is wholly to the advantage of minorities and the poor, that it is not the property of any particular social group or stratum (1989a, 11). He states that "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, neighbourhood, and region" (1989a, 21).

This is where Hirsch's arguments start to become contradictory. The core cultural information that Hirsch argues is "the most democratic" in the land is broadly associated with the American upper-middle class (1989a, 19). As he argues that this information is open to all, he also asserts that the degree to which minorities and marginalised members of society are able to become culturally literate, will determine their ability to escape the cycle of poverty and thrive in society. Clearly then, cultural literacy is not as democratic and inclusive as Hirsch suggests if minorities and marginalised members of society do not have access to it to begin with. In an article published in 1985, "Cultural Literacy Does Not Mean Core Curriculum", Hirsch discusses the members of the "club" who traditionally have access to cultural literacy in the United States:

> To make the idea of cultural literacy explicit is therefore to issue an open invitation to not yet fully literate people, inviting them to join the company of literate people. I say open invitation because in the past, knowledge about cultural literacy has been closed off and restricted to those who have already belonged to the club. In the normal course of things, literate people can become members of the club only after years of reading and conversation with other literate people … In the past, people outside the club might have wished for a more efficient way to acquire this shared background information, but they have lacked a guide. My article was just a first step in calling attention to the importance of the shared information that literate Americans take for granted. Once we are conscious of the fact of cultural literacy, and of the importance to disadvantaged people of our not keeping a knowledge of its finite contents the exclusive secret of the well educated, perhaps some excluded members of our society will be more encouraged to become members of the literacy club. (1985, 48)

As Hirsch accurately points out, the problems and ramifications of illiteracy go beyond the inability to read and write or to do so poorly. An illiterate person is unable to partake fully in society (1989a, 12). Thus, Hirsch's long-term goal was that all American citizens would become culturally literate, that they could pick up any piece of writing, or watch any television show written for "the average person", and understand what it was about (1989a, xvi, 12). His intention was to empower schoolchildren of marginalised backgrounds by giving them access to the canon of literate American culture. His contention is that in so doing, their linguistic literacy would improve, they would become better readers, writers and communicators and they could reap the rewards of knowing how to operate

efficiently in a liberal Western democracy like the United States; essentially, they would know how to "play the game". As Cook puts it, in Hirsch's view, through cultural literacy American schoolchildren would eventually be prepared to "engage productively in political discourse and join in the ongoing democratic conversation of the United States" (Cook 2009, 487).

On the one hand Hirsch suggests that cultural literacy is available to all, but on the other he argues that it has traditionally been the privilege of only a chosen few, and that it should be made available to all, as a form of empowerment. What Hirsch fails to address are the systemic reasons why cultural literacy has not been available to everyone and how allowing minorities and other disenfranchised groups to "join the club" does not necessarily change the club's rules, but may, in fact, perpetuate them. What biases, unconscious or not, have affected the club's workings and identity? In order to promote cultural literacy effectively Hirsch wanted to create a national canon that would encompass all the information culturally literate Americans should be acquainted with. He advocates "tolerance" of multiculturalism in education, but stresses that this should not be its aim. According to him, the primary responsibility of schools is acculturation (1989a, xviii). He further argues that "to teach the ways of one's own community has always been and still remains the essence of the education of our children, who enter neither a narrow tribal culture nor a transcendent world culture but a national literate culture. For profound historical reasons, this is the way of the modern world" (1989a, 18). Here, Hirsch's assertions show a profound misunderstanding of the necessary skills to navigate social diversity. Rather than teaching students the necessary skills to navigate difference, he wishes to standardise that difference through nationalism. Furthermore, there is also an unfortunately myopic view of the intricacies and needs of "the modern world". Hirsch goes on to say that "educational policy always involves choices between degrees of worthiness. The concept of cultural literacy helps us to make such decisions because it places a higher value on national than other local information" (1989a, 25). The problem is who determines what core information is "worthy" of being taught and for what reasons? According to what parameters? And how can these ideas and their inherent flaws be questioned if they are being taught as the national doxa? This is extremely problematic. The type of uniformity of knowledge proposed by Hirsch is dangerous. In World Literature Studies, canon formation is an ongoing subject of debate because of these very reasons. Who writes the canon?

What biases and cultural assumptions go into it? And how can these biases not continue to favour certain groups above others, instead of empowering those who are marginalised? The creation of a national cultural canon can easily develop into the officialisation of national cultural hegemony.

To Hirsch's credit he is not unaware of the implications of his suggestions. He knows that the approach to literacy he proposes is not only a linguistic skill associated with cultural facts, but also a political choice. He discussed this prior to the publication of his book, in his article "Cultural Literacy", where he states,

> The big political question that has to be decided first of all is whether we want a broadly literate culture that unites our cultural fragments enough to allow us to write to one another and read what our fellow citizens have written. Our traditional, Jeffersonian answer has been yes. But even if that political decision remains the dominant one, as I very much hope, we still face the much more difficult political decision of choosing the contents of cultural literacy. (1983, 167)

Hirsch identifies the problem, but he does not address it in his article. He goes on to argue that the contents of the cultural literacy canon need to be decided through much "discussion, argument, and compromise" as part of an ongoing public debate (1983, 167). However, nine years later, with the publication of *Cultural Literacy* the problem was partially resolved, according to Hirsch, when he compiled what became infamously known as "the List", an appendix to his book that served as an inventory of events, concepts, places and figures, "from some idealised, textbook version of American culture" (Cook 2009, 487). As Ellwanger and Cook suggest, through his List Hirsch seemed to be dictating "a particular narrative of the past" (2009, 472). The List has more than 60 pages of definitions ranging from "1066" to "Zurich". It was later expanded and published as the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Hirsch's idea was that the List would not be set in stone, but revised according to the shifts and fluctuations of American culture. Again, this raises a number of questions: who determines what goes into it? Following what rationale? What definition of "American culture", and what are the implications of such a definition? In "Reflections on Art and Education" published in 1990, Hirsch discusses these very issues in regard to his idea of cultural literacy,

> This brings me to what I conceive to be the great weakness of the cultural literacy idea as an agent of curricular decision. Cultural literacy is descriptive, it tells us what educated people already know. It does not tell us whether that knowledge ought to be changed. Cultural literacy is descriptive, and therefore can only improve culture in the sense that it brings a wider range of social classes into mainstream culture. In social terms, that by itself is surely an improvement of culture. But cultural literacy says nothing about how to improve mainstream culture itself. The tasks of art education in deciding upon a definite curriculum is simultaneously to raise everyone to a level of existing mainstream culture and to attempt to advance existing culture beyond its current level. (5)

Instead of questioning the inherent biases of an educational system that favours certain groups above others, and addressing those biases, as Hirsch acknowledges, his approach is in a sense, continuing them by suggesting that schoolchildren of marginalised groups should be taught how to be literate in the workings of that system. It was these ideological problems that turned *Cultural Literacy* into political ammunition and made the book worthy of "one of academia's most dubious honours–the right not to be read" (Ellwanger and Cook, 475). Robert Scholes, one of the early reviewers of Hirsch's book, points out that *Cultural Literacy* "upon a first reading, is a book of extraordinary plausibility. Its tremendous appeal stems from the way it describes a large and serious problem, to which it offers a simple, easy and inexpensive solution" (1988, 328). Unfortunately, easy and inexpensive solutions to serious, complex problems, particularly social issues that have been gestating for centuries, are very rare, and Hirsch's idea of cultural literacy was not such a solution.

Some of Hirsch's ideas are not without merit, and it is important to be critical enough to point them out. At the core of Hirsch's theories is the foundation of a public discourse and the hope that the majority of the population would be able to access it. As Cook argues, Hirsch's ideas also highlight an important point: familiarity with the mainstream culture of a nation is crucial if we wish to have a "politically engaged, transformative or transgressive discourse" that can generate authentic social change (2009, 496). These are very laudable goals, but as stressed before the particular idea of a "public discourse" that Hirsch proposes is dictated and circumscribed by a social elite, a very specific sub-culture, and this has very problematic implications.

1.2 Cultural Literacy Redefined

The definition of cultural literacy proposed in this book is markedly different from Hirsch's. Firstly, our aims are very different from his. We do not seek to establish a cultural canon in the hope that by learning it students will become more linguistically literate, or with the belief that this will help them engage with public discourse; far from it. Our work does not address linguistic literacy at all. We are interested in the skills and knowledge that help our students understand cultural differences and draw meaning from them. We do not believe that the complexity of difference should be flattened or harmonised. There is great richness in that complexity. Without further discussing the moral issues involved in Hirsch's proposition, let us stress that the pragmatics of his suggestion are untenable. As the last 30 years have demonstrated, what Hirsch suggests, the regularisation and equalisation of canonical national knowledge simply cannot be done, particularly with the level of migration and transnational communication that we experience today. What we *can* do is teach our students how to understand cultural differences, and how to draw meaning from them, the skills and knowledge necessary to approach the unfamiliar without trepidation.

Our approach to cultural literacy is an amalgam of different sources. We align ourselves with Tony Schirato and Susan Yell's approach to the term, first published in their book *Communication and Cultural Literacy* (2000). We have also been strongly influenced by the Cultural Literacy in Europe Forum, chaired by Naomi Segal, and by her ideas as outlined in "Cultural Literacy in Europe", and her introduction to *From Literature to Cultural Literacy* (2014). The year 2007 saw the beginning of a new approach to cultural literacy, vastly different from Hirsch's, with the start of a project that sought to follow a group of scholars interested in taking their research in literary studies past the mere study of texts. The project was based in Europe. The academics involved wanted to explore new ways in which literary studies could contribute to the grand challenges that humanity is facing. In 2009 the project was funded by the European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) and by the European Science Foundation (ESF) (Segal et al. 2013, 4–5). A steering committee was established; one of the first steps taken by the committee was to rename their field of research "Literary and Cultural Studies" (LCS) and to define what this new field entailed (Segal 2014, 4). The work of that committee has evolved into what is now known as the Cultural Literacy in Europe Forum. The Forum comprises a considerable number of

academics, and contrary to its name, many of them are based outside of Europe (the authors of this book are members of the Forum, and until early 2020 chaired its Special Interest Group in Higher Education). The committee defined LCS as a field that studies society and culture through "the lens of literary thinking" (Segal 2014, 7). LCS is an interdisciplinary, intercultural field. In terms of interdisciplinarity, it is open to learning and incorporating new knowledge and skills from disciplines other than itself, but it also applies its skills and concepts to other disciplines. The overall aim of this approach is to establish a dialogue that appreciates difference and understands difference as a potential source of richness in interdisciplinary collaborations. Thus, LCS "specializes in not being specialized, in the circulation or delocalization of knowledge and in 'decentring the self'" (Segal 2014, 6). Without this approach, where skills and knowledge are purposefully translated and utilised beyond the boundaries of a single discipline, it is impossible to imagine addressing those aforementioned "grand challenges" that the world faces. Addressing these challenges must be a concerted, additive effort. Consequently, LCS is as willing to collaborate and learn from different disciplines as it is to do so across cultures. The appreciation of difference and the "decentring of self" are at the core of both interdisciplinarity and interculturality; in essence, the intention and *modus operandi* are the same. Thus, LCS promotes skills and knowledge that help us better negotiate disciplinary and cultural differences, hoping that this approach will result in more fruitful collaborations.

As mentioned before, LCS looks at society and culture through "the lens of literary thinking". This "lens of literary thinking" is paramount to understanding how LCS conceives of cultural literacy. Because of its background in literary studies, LCS sees a "text-like" quality in society and culture (Segal et al. 2013, 4). An approach that acknowledges the "text-like" nature of society and culture by definition also presupposes their readability. Consequently, LCS sees society, culture and their countless components as "texts" that can be analysed and interpreted in a myriad ways. In this sense, "fields of knowledge, historical and political events, social interactions, and any other manifestation of culture, can be considered readable" (Segal et al. 2013, 4). An educated, well-informed, critically engaged reading and interpretation of a culture different to one's own is concomitant with a high level of cultural literacy.

1.3 Cultural Literacy as Literary Practice

Our approach to teaching cultural literacy has been deeply influenced by Segal's ideas. The contrast between Hirsch's understanding of cultural literacy and that of the Cultural Literacy in Europe Forum is strong. Rather than promoting a dominant idea of Western culture, we support the "decentring of self", in the understanding that skills and knowledge exist in a spectrum of relativity rather than a hierarchy (as we will discuss later, this is a core aspect of our teaching approach, through the notion of destabilisation). We see differences, whether disciplinary or cultural, as potential sources of richness in collaboration. This varies considerably from Hirsch's ideas of standardisation of knowledge. Our goal is to teach students how to transfer the skills and knowledge that they learn as part of a course on literary and cultural studies from the classroom to the real world; to show how these finely honed skills of critique, analysis, argumentation and interpretation can be used to decipher difference in our everyday lives; to teach them how to move beyond the boundaries of our own disciplines and cultures, to build epistemological bridges through the "lens of literary thinking"; and to teach them how to "read" the world we live in, and make sense of what we don't know. We refer to this application of literary theory beyond the "confines" of the classroom or the written page as "literary practice", an essential component of our approach to cultural literacy.

Traditionally, literary practice refers to reading and/or writing literature, or reading and/or writing about literature. But here we define literary practice as the application of the skills and knowledge learned as part of a course on literary and cultural studies to real-life scenarios, which is to say, events that take place outside the study of literature itself. The comparative literature scholar Gayatri Spivak argues that "the bottom line of teaching literature as such is to teach how to read, in the most robust sense … it is to teach an activism of the imagination and intellect" (2011, 457). This is precisely our intention when we teach cultural literacy. To show students how to read and interpret the world; to instil in them a pragmatic, organic application of semiotics, to the point that it becomes a *modus operandi*. In this sense, our pedagogical approach has also been influenced by the work of Tony Schirato and Susan Yell and by Intercultural Communication theory.

Schirato and Yell explore cultural literacy in relation to communication practices. In *Communication and Cultural Literacy* they define cultural

literacy as "a knowledge of meaning systems, and the ability to negotiate those systems within different cultural contexts" (2000, xi). Following basic notions of polysemy, they argue that different communication practices are interpreted differently by people from different cultures and disciplines. Similar to the Cultural Literacy in Europe Forum, their approach is both intercultural and interdisciplinary. They incorporate a range of theories into their teaching that include semiotics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, postcolonial studies and political and cultural theory. Schirato and Yell use these different influences to create a theoretical framework that allows tertiary students to reflect on their own communication practices. Far from exhaustive, the framework they propose is additive and open to new ideas dependent upon different communication contexts. We have been influenced by Schirato and Yell's additive approach to teaching cultural literacy, which has helped us incorporate into our own teaching practice techniques such as Open-Space Learning, and a wealth of scholarly approaches to experiential learning and, most importantly, reflective practice. But prior to such reflection there must be a context of "difference" for the students to reflect on; this is where the other key influence in our work, intercultural competence theory, comes into play.

1.4 Cultural Literacy and Intercultural Competence

Early in our research, we noticed that there were considerable overlaps between our understanding of cultural literacy, and important tenets of intercultural competence (ICC), which more recently has also been referred to as cultural intelligence (CQ). Because this has now become a broad field of study, what precisely constitutes ICC has been interpreted in a number of different ways. There is also considerable variation regarding how this competence is fostered and what it may look like. In *Conceptualising Intercultural Competence*, Spitzberg and Chagnon broadly define ICC as "the appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations to the world" (2009, 379). At a basic level this definition encompasses the key points that many definitions of ICC ascribe to. However, it is important to note that the field of ICC studies lacks an overarching methodology, agreed set of approaches or set of practices. This is partly because

ICC, much like literary and cultural studies, is intrinsically interdisciplinary. As a research field, it sits across multiple disciplines—from communication studies to sociology and linguistics—and is used as the basis for developing competence across a number of different areas, each of these with a particular, different aim in relation to the others. This breadth of focus has allowed for the development of a rich interplay of practices in competence training; however, to its detriment, it has been limiting in the sense that it has not propitiated the development of a robust theoretical and analytical framework.

Despite this great variance, Spitzberg and Chagnon have categorised the approaches to conceptualising ICC into five model types: compositional, co-orientational, developmental, adaptational and causal process (2009, 453–467). Co-orientational models focus on interaction while developmental models focus on stages through which an individual transitions as their competence grows. Adaptational models emphasise a process of "mutual adjustment" that the multiple actors in an interaction go through to achieve enhanced levels of competence. In this model "competence is manifest in mutual alteration of actions, attitudes, and understandings based on interaction with members of another culture" (466). Causal process models examine specific relationships between the variables involved in intercultural interactions. These broad conceptual models in themselves offer little to our conceptualisation of cultural literacy. They focus primarily on descriptive accounts of intercultural interactions and the ways in which individuals may achieve greater levels of effectiveness in these interactions. A common focus across them is the ability to overcome difference in order to achieve enhanced communication and a greater understanding through a process of cultural adaptation. Although not to the extent that it happens with Hirsch, this is still an approach that views difference as problematic, as something that must be overcome, which is drastically different to what we propose. In this sense, as Kaibin Xu (2013) points out, "the difference-as-problem" approach dominates the theorisation of ICC, and we can deduce, the practice it informs. Xu asserts that this perspective reduces linguistic and cultural differences to a "communication problem" and essentialises culture (380). He points out that this approach and the

> functionalist research that stem from this approach have been critiqued in the following four ways: (1) for neglecting the historical contexts and power relations between different cultural groups; (2) for setting up unnecessary

dichotomies and rigid expectations; (3) for taking a unitary and essentializing view of the self; and (4) for an epistemological foundation that is problematic and limiting.

It is important to note that much criticism has been laid at the foot of ICC for its primarily Western, Anglo-focused view and the ethnocentricity inherent in that position (Spitzberg and Chagnon 2009, 976) The development of ICC as a field closely aligns to the post-World War II period, in which nations sought to interact in meaningful ways at a socio-political level in order to strengthen growing global economic ties. This preoccupation resulted in attempts to define what characteristics make for an interculturally competent individual, or what traits can be identified that show the best potential for someone to become interculturally competent. In the first instance, this desire to develop and identify competency stemmed from studies of participants in the US Peace Corps programme established in 1961 by President Kennedy. The Peace Corps had as its broad mission the aim of enabling others to have a greater understanding of US culture while simultaneously promoting greater knowledge of other cultures. In many ways, the Peace Corps was seen to take up the reins of a flagging religious missionary presence. In examining the success of participants, academics were able to identify key characteristics or traits that made individuals more or less successful in their work (Spitzberg and Chagnon 422), and some of these key traits, including adaptability, cultural sensitivity and tolerance were later identified with ICC. The history of the Peace Corps itself, together with an aim that had decidedly neocolonial undertakings, leave ICC with a genealogy that constructs it from a particular set of values that privilege Western viewpoints. As an area dominated by Anglo-American academics, many of the models listed above have at their centre an aim to increase competency to leverage business and socio-economic advantages through successful intercultural interactions. This can be seen by the development of the field in the 1970s and the 1980s in relation to understanding and evaluating increasingly global business endeavours (Spitzberg and Chagnon 423)

Of course, this does not mean that the field has been frozen in time nor does it discount that among the plethora of approaches in ICC there are more nuanced understandings of what traits mark an interculturally competent individual. For example, Bennett's (1986) well-known Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity establishes a framework that attempts to explain how people experience cultural difference moving