

Texas Multiple Cultures and the Educational Core

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by

Richard T. Hull, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Texas Council for the Humanities

I want in this talk to explore with you some ways to get at the question of core curriculum reform through reasoning about moral issue of how a society relates, or should relate, to the facts of its people's ethnic and linguistic make-up. The Core Curriculum issues are vast; but curriculum reform is an ongoing process; while this may seem the eleventh hour as the Coordinating Board meets in just over a week to finalize state-wide mandates, you can take my remarks as either endorsing a set of arguments for next week, or as lining up the ducks for the next round of curricular reform.

I spent 30 years in an academic philosophy department at a medium size state university with a graduate program. While aware of some of the elements in the so-called culture wars, my own appreciation of the social and political issues involved has followed a strong, upward, expansive curve since becoming Executive Director of the Texas Council for the Humanities. That learning curve has involved me in extensive reading, in seeking orientation to the remarkable Texas legislative system, in trying to grasp educational movements and realities in a state that boasts of three of the four best endowed educational institutions in the United States but also enjoys the second-to-largest percentage of functionally illiterate adults (just behind Louisiana) and an enormous drop-out rate in secondary schools.

Coming out of the academy (going back into the Cave, as some would suggest) has forced me to take a wider look at the question of multiculturalism, and has nudged me toward a series of rather stark facts and realizations in terms of which I am beginning to visit the questions of core curriculum content anew:

Fact: The Institute of Texan Cultures has exhibits for 27 ethnic cultures in its exhibition hall.

Fact: The Texas Folklife Festival in August attracted 42 ethnic groups providing either food, entertainment, or crafts: 21 from Europe, 5 from South America,

4 from North America, 3 from Africa, 3 from Asia, 3 from the Middle East, 2 from the Pacific, and 1 from the Caribbean. These are all Texans with ethnic origins elsewhere, either immigrants or American-born wanting to maintain their cultural origins.

Fact: By some point in the early part of the next century, Anglo- and European-Americans will make up only about 45% of the population of the state of Texas; Hispanic-Americans will be equal in number; African-Americans will represent the third largest group (about 15%); the balance will be Asian-Americans, Middle-East-Americans, and so-called Native-Americans.

Fact: NAFTA, GATT, and other efforts at globalizing the world's economies will continue to offer challenges and opportunities to Texas commerce for increasing international trade.

Fact: While Texas still maintains a commitment to bilingual education, its focus is almost exclusively on teaching literacy and other subjects in Spanish to native-speakers of Spanish; there is neither the requirement nor the universal opportunity for native-speakers of English to become bilingual.

Fact: the number of teachers of foreign language in Texas schools, both of elective languages and required languages, is decreasing.

Fact: In a comparison of 8 countries, the United States ranks second in the percentage of its citizens that read at the highest levels of literacy, and second in the percentage of its citizens that fall below the lowest levels of literacy.

Fact: Apart from the languages of Native Americans, the "original" language of Texas was Spanish, not English.

These facts form the background against which I want to consider several arguments having to do with what the state's position on the official language for its citizens should be. Those arguments have implications for curriculum content throughout K-16 education, and it is from those implications that compelling considerations for the core's content flow.

The Arguments for English as the official of the United States (and thus for Texas) are well-known.

First is what I'll call the historical Argument. English-speaking people colonized the first colonies for the most part, with the historical facts of American independence involving separation from an English-speaking nation and formation of a new nation in which English dominated. The push westward to the Pacific coast was done by chiefly English-speakers, and while they encountered aboriginal tribes of so-called Indians, the latter lacked a single trans-tribal language. English was the language — either the first language or the language acquired by immigrants — of this westward expansion, and it has held sway historically since Plymouth Rock.

The principle that transforms these (alleged) facts seems to be something like, First come, first served.

The second argument, which I'll call the Pragmatic Argument or the Argument from Efficiency, points to English as nearly world wide, the spread of Western culture, the dominance of English as a global language of diplomacy, business, commerce, tourism, and finally the pervasiveness of English in the affairs of our country.

Efficiency dictates retaining that dominant language as the official language; the business of the country's laws, commerce, maps, signs - everything that makes up material culture expressed in language - is most efficiently carried out in English.

The ruling principle here seems to be: What's right is what works most efficiently for the greatest number.

The third argument turns on the sheer dominance of English in American economic, legal, and social affairs. It is unfair and unjust to allow immigration without providing effective English instruction and requiring immigrants to achieve functional mastery of the language. If you wanted to create an impoverished, unemployable or marginally employable class, the quickest way would be to admit non-English speakers to the country and deny them instruction in English. What skills they brought would quickly be appropriated at the most minimum levels of compensations. And, if you restricted them into enclaves and kept their children from participating in English-language education, if you provided no native-language educational system at public expense, you could rely on the cumulative effects over a couple of generations to produce a permanent population of functional illiterates to do the scut work of society.

So this third argument proceeds on a Principle of Fairness: since it would be unfair to admit immigrants only to plunge them into permanent poverty in order to exploit them, there is a special moral responsibility to provide effective English-language instruction to immigrants and their children.

The fourth and final argument for English as the sole national language comes from European notions that arose in the period of intense European colonization of Africa and the New World, notions subsumed under the Doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Enormously oversimplified, this argument states that various European cultures had a divine mandate to colonize, organize native peoples, and bring to them the institutions, technology, laws, and languages of those nations enjoying the benefit of "superior" culture. The historical facts have picked out the United States as one of the places of England's manifest destiny, and so the imposition of English as the official language is part of the parcel of the culture of whose destiny America formed a major expression. Post-modernism has stripped this argument of much of its ideals and reduced it to a form of Thrasymachus's principle, Might makes right.

It is instructive to cast these arguments for English as the sole language of Texas against the backdrop of facts I cited earlier, to see what the effect of the special facts of Texas is on these rationales.

The Historical Argument, that English was the language of the first settlers, so it should remain the language of the land on a first-come, first served principle, fails on its own terms. For Texas — Tejas that spread from Central America up almost to Canada and all the way to much of the West coast — was settled first by Spanish-speaking persons. The recent PBS documentary, *The Mexican-American War*, establishes both this fact and the facts of Anglo appropriation of the territory. But if the historical argument is valid, Spanish should be the language of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Colorado, and portions of Wyoming and Idaho.

The Pragmatic Argument has made a case for English as a second language

worldwide, but not a case for the only such language. Thus, while efficiency may well indicate the de facto necessity of English language instruction for all Texans, it doesn't automatically establish hegemony of English. On a global basis, English stands alongside other languages as having international and intercultural currency; no case has yet been made for it being the sole requirement of efficiency — or of efficiency being the sole relevant factor.

Likewise, the third Argument from Fairness and Non-exploitation argues for the importance of literacy, for the importance of literacy in English. Nothing in it precludes literacy in one's native language. In fact, the argument from fairness, from establishing a level playing field for interactions between persons in all manner of settings, strongly suggests that means to achieve Spanish literacy should be available and a requirement for immigration into the state of Texas.

I recently attended a meeting of the Commissioner's Advisory Committee on International Issues, a committee of the Texas Board of Higher Education. One of the committee members, Beth Huddleston, who works for Dallas's International Trade Center, recently hosted a reception for Advisor Committee members at a meeting in Austin. The workers at the hotel who were setting up the reception spoke only Spanish. Beth, who is the ideal Texan Anglo (fluent in both English and Spanish, plus several other languages, and a strong proponent of very early childhood language exposure), not only was able to direct the workers without assistance, but also regaled us with tales of how she kept her work crew that built their house on track (the architect didn't speak Spanish at all).

The final argument for English as the sole language is the one we are least comfortable with — the argument that Might makes right, the Argument from manifest Destiny. There is much to discuss in such a topic, but I want to make two related observations. The first is that, as we come to appreciate the aggressive imperialism of our ancestors, complex obligations emerge towards those still suffering under the effects of that imperialism. Among these are special obligations to work toward a sense of mutual respect and functional equality, to be able to meet others on their own terms, to interact in their language, to support celebration of their histories, and thereby to provide a measure of amelioration of the inequalities fostered by those historical events that proceeded under the more rapacious justifications of manifest destiny.

I am not a proponent of Anglo guilt. The historical guilt game can be played over and over, pointing the accusing finger at the Spanish as well as the English, the French as well as, in other places, the Germans. Rather, I advocate recognition of the social, economic, legal, and linguistic imbalances created by the waves of manifest destiny exploitation that characterize all our pasts.

I think that nationally, English should, if only for pragmatic reasons, remain the official language for all states. But it may be that Texas is a special case.

The prospect of equal numbers of Hispanic and Anglo Texans, the historical precedence of Spanish as the native language, the rates of illiteracy and illiteracy-related poverty, point to some major policy needs of this state. I offer the following as policy consequences of the various arguments we have been reviewing:

1. All Texans should be provided with the opportunity, and be required to demonstrate, English language proficiency, as a condition of full U.S. Citizenship.

As a quid pro quo,

2. All Texans should be provided with the opportunity, and be required to demonstrate, Spanish language proficiency, as a condition of full state citizenship.

3. Achievement of 1, so long as Texas remains a part of the union, should suffice to permit English to remain the official language for legal, business, and other official matters. However, the joint achievement of 1 and 2 will probably put pressure on the one official language requirement, and we may find that we move increasingly toward a 2-language system similar to those in some European countries (such as Switzerland, with three official languages, or Belgium, with two).

The above policy implications, of course, clash with national standards of citizenship and free movement across state borders. It may be that rendering Spanish language competence a requirement of Texas citizenship is unworkable, even unconstitutional. Still, these are policy implications the discussion of which is part of the proper business of civil public debate and discourse.

The core curriculum implications of arguments of the sort I've been reviewing — not endorsing but reviewing — are profound. The first is the introduction of foreign language — i.e., non-native language — instruction into the K-16 curriculum. We all know that true literacy and functional mastery of a foreign language comes, at least for those that don't specialize in language study, with early and continuous instruction and use. So the most efficient economics of bi-lingualism as a state goal require introduction of Spanish language into the earlier grades. My own experiments and experiences as headmaster of a private school in Buffalo, New York, as well as a large body of educational scholarship, indicates that children as young as 3 are capable of absorbing languages — in the robust plural — as quickly as they can be exposed to them.

For the adult population, there must be a commitment to literacy in the broadest sense of the ability to read functionally at least at levels necessary for performing the duties of the citizen and the employee. As I have indicated, requirements of national citizenship indicate that literacy must be achieved in English. For immigrants and American-born illiterates, this requirement mandates some kind of sustained opportunities and requirements for all Americans to raise them to at least minimal levels of English language literacy.

But the special historical facts and demographics of Texas may impose an equal requirement of availability and necessity of Spanish-language instruction for those of us who aspire to be fully functioning Texans. The implications for curriculum aren't fully spelled out, but at a minimum Spanish language instruction should be provided to the point where a student can demonstrate a level of proficiency sufficient to permit functioning in Spanish-dominant communities in the State; with elective opportunities thereafter to extend mastery and bring it to bear on professional fields.

For the adult, English-speaking immigrant to Texas (like myself), short of requiring proficiency in Spanish as a condition of citizenship, instruction in Spanish

should be readily available in high schools and colleges, whether in credit bearing courses or not. And arguably, employers who “import” non-Spanish speaking workers should recognize and shoulder the costs of such training.

I’ve taken you through this exercise as an illustration of a principled way of proceeding to argue for elements in a core curriculum that is robust in its liberal arts content. This demonstration is but a sketch of the complex cast to be made for foreign language instruction, where “foreign language” now is relativized to the first language of a person, and in Texas should perhaps be replaced with “bilingual instruction.” My aim has been to simulate discussion of some hard social issues.

In closing let me make one last point.

Failing in the task of realistically accommodating all of the elements in the Texas multiplicity of cultures, we will contemplate the stark realities of what individuals as widely distributed on the political spectrum as Arthur Schlesinger and Carl Rowan have warned against: balkanization of our society, enclaves and ghettos of increasingly alienated groups of citizens, increasing racism and race wars.