

YOU HAVE  PREMIUM ACCESS

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

NEWS OPINION ADVICE STORE JOBS **DEAN**  **RENEW**
Individual Subscriber SECTIONS

FEATURED: History's Attack Dog The 2018 Influence List Why We Need to Rethink Remediation

Search 

June 8, 2009 by Mark Bauerlein

The Underestimation of Cultural Literacy

Consider this scenario.

A bright young man graduates from Emory University law school with a high ranking and big ambitions. He has an interview at one of the leading law firms in Atlanta, and he walks in with all the confidence of the best and brightest ones with a pile of recorded achievements on his resume. Besides, he did a summer associateship with the firm a year earlier, and all went well.

The morning goes smoothly, with young people in the office finding him energetic, genial, and smart. Lunch is set with a few senior partners and one of the founders, people who've been with the firm since the beginning or soon after. He joins them at the table and the conversation flows, but drifts off into issues well beyond clients and cases.

They are in their fifties and sixties, and their memories of Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush are fresh. One of them mentions Putin and Russia, another recalls something about Carter and the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, and another offers a comment about Berlin spy movies.

They look toward him, awaiting anything he might say about the Cold War, anything at all. It's not a test, and it's not planned. For them, the Cold War is simply one of those realities that any intelligent person is familiar with and has some opinions about.

But this young man is an overachiever and has been since high school. He has regarded knowledge as a classroom requirement, something to know for the test and the paper. Learning has been instrumental all along, that is, an instrument for getting a good grade and a good score. Since entering college, he has aimed for law school, which means that those classes in history, English, art history, religion, and other liberal arts subjects were more a bother than a formation. They distracted from the career path, and the knowledge he was supposed to acquire in them appeared more a threat than an enhancement.

So, he remembers the Cold War as some kind of tense stand-off between the United States and the Soviet Union (yes, he does remember that old empire's name), but that's about all.

If he's quick, he deflects the questioning glances with a question of his own, such as "Was the threat of a nuclear war really all that likely and frightening in the 70s?"

But he's unaccustomed to being on the spot in conversation, and so he flounders with a remark about not knowing much about it and a laugh.

About This Blog

Posts on Brainstorm present the views of their authors. They do not represent the position of the editors, nor does posting here imply any endorsement by *The Chronicle*.



The Conversation

The Chronicle's new online opinion venue features discussion about higher education, ideas, and academic life.

[Read more »](#)

Archives

Select Month 

The others have the tact to move on, but they note the deficiency. It doesn't cost the young man the job, but the senior fellows make a judgment. This guy, they think, is sharp and hard-working, but get out of his training and he doesn't bring much to the table. The deeper awareness that makes for a sober judgment and wider perspective is missing.

Is this a likely episode?

I think so. I know some of those people in Atlanta, and in conversation they tend to be informed and curious and opinionated about political and civic matters. Not just current events, either. They respect historical knowledge and literary learning. Quote some Shakespeare and they're impressed. Say something about Harry Truman and they remember it.

This is the professional value of cultural literacy. It counts a lot more in professional spheres than academics and educators realize. The measure is informal, yes, but it makes a difference in how peers and superiors regard you.

This is an outcome that educators should remember whenever they think about eliminating a U.S. history component to the general education requirements, or when they object to recommended reading lists in state content standards, or when they emphasize skills and critical thinking while saying nothing about content knowledge.

[Return to Top ↑](#)

[Bookmark the permalink.](#)

Comments for this thread are now closed



0 Comments

The Chronicle of Higher Education

dsaitta ▾

Recommend

Tweet

Share

Sort by Oldest ▾

This discussion has been closed.

Subscribe Add Disqus to your siteAdd DisqusAdd

1255 Twenty-Third St., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20037

Copyright © 2018 The Chronicle of Higher Education

