

Connections: The Liberty Common School Reading Lists

By Cherie Pedersen

“But there’s so much to learn,” he said, with a thoughtful frown.

“Yes, that’s true,” admitted Rhyme; “but it’s not just learning things that’s important. It’s learning what to do with what you learn and learning why you learn things at all that matters.”

“That’s just what I mean,” explained Milo as Tock and the exhausted bug drifted quietly off to sleep. “Many of the things I’m supposed to know seem so useless that I can’t see the purpose in learning them at all.”

“You may not see it now,” said the Princess of Pure Reason, looking knowingly at Milo’s puzzled face, “but whatever we learn has a purpose and whatever we do affects everything and everyone else, if even in the tiniest way.”

The Phantom Tollbooth

When I first started teaching, we were told that we needed to provide background knowledge. What background knowledge? Like Milo, I felt that there was so much for students to learn. Then I read E.D. Hirsch’s book *Cultural Literacy*. Finally, someone answered my question. The Core Knowledge sequence outlines the background knowledge students need to be literate.

Through teaching science, history, geography, Latin, math, music, art, and literature, we are providing the background knowledge needed for students to be able to comprehend what they read and hear. E.D. Hirsch in his article *Reading Comprehension Requires Knowledge of Words, and the World* explains how background knowledge impacts reading comprehension.

Prior knowledge about the topic speeds up basic comprehension and leaves working memory free to make connections between the new material and previously learned information, to draw inferences, and to ponder implications. A big difference between an expert and a novice reader—indeed between an expert and a novice in any field—is the ability to take in basic features very fast, thereby leaving the mind free to concentrate on important features.

As a teacher it is exciting to have a student come up and share something they found in a book that connects to content being taught in class. This year the students have found the following connections:

- Wrinkle in Time* –Earth tilting on its axis and spinning; Orion’s belt (Astronomy Unit)
- Trumpet of the Swans* – saying “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”
- Moffat’s Muesum* – meteor “shooting star” (Astronomy Unit); Danube River (Rivers Unit); Vini Vidi Vici (Ancient Rome)
- Indian in the Cupboard* – “three sisters”, longhouses (Native American Unit)

- ❑ *Rufus M.* – Medula oblagata (Human Body); Long division
- ❑ *Middle Moffats* – Pompeii (Ancient Rome)
- ❑ *Old Yeller* – Apache (Native Americans)
- ❑ *Fantastic Mr. Fox* – ear wax (Human Body)
- ❑ *Lion, Witch and the Wardrobe* – “Make it Pax” –(Ancient Rome Unit)
- ❑ *Charlotte’s Web* – Magnum Opus (Latin)
- ❑ *Little House in the Prairie* – Laura crossed the Missouri River (Rivers Unit)
- ❑ *Stuart Little* – Barges on the river with tow boats (Rivers Unit)
- ❑ *Mary Poppins Comes Back* – saying “Last straw”, constellations (Astronomy Unit)
- ❑ *Kavik* – saying “Feather in your cap”
- ❑ *Cricket in Times Square* – Yangtze River; Blue Danube song

These fantastic books are on the LCS 3rd-4th Grade Reading List. We encourage students to choose books from the reading lists for many reasons, vocabulary, rich sentence structure, depth of the story, and its connection to background knowledge.

Finally, in order to immerse students in word knowledge and expose them to many well-written, diverse and meaningful works of literature, we have supplemented the Core Knowledge Sequence with (primarily) classic works of fiction – stories which have withstood the test of time. In accordance with Liberty’s Charter, “The literature suggested by the Core Knowledge Sequence, as well as other literature that will be introduced, is chosen not only for its place in the core body of knowledge, its multi-cultural representation, and its rich use of language, but also because it provides access to deeper meaning of universal human problems, particularly those which preoccupy children’s minds.” (LCS Literacy Policy)

In Cultural Literacy Hirsch states, “Background knowledge does not take care of itself. Reading and writing are cumulative skills; the more we read the more necessary knowledge we gain for further reading.” The Core Knowledge Sequence outlines the background knowledge students need to learn in order to communicate effectively both in reading and writing. The books listed on the reading lists provide rich background knowledge, vocabulary, and sentence structure. But even more than that, they help students see the connection with what they are learning in class. We love the excitement we see in our classrooms when our students connect content learned in the Liberty curriculum with ideas in a book they are reading from our reading list!

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