



1-18-2016

## If Ignorance Is Bliss, We Sure Must Have a Lot of Happy People!: The Startling Decline in Cultural Literacy

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### Recommended Citation

Bird, John and Teaching and Learning Center, "If Ignorance Is Bliss, We Sure Must Have a Lot of Happy People!: The Startling Decline in Cultural Literacy" (2016). *The Weekly Reader*. 86.  
<https://digitalcommons.winthrop.edu/weeklyreader/86>

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January 18, 2016  
Volume 7, Issue 15

# The Weekly Reader

Teaching and Learning Center, Winthrop University, Rock Hill, SC

## UpComing Sessions

1/20, 1/21, 1/26  
ADA Awareness  
1/21 Better  
Student  
Presentations  
1/26, 2/3 FERPA  
Training  
1/28, 2/2  
Discovering  
Library  
Resources  
2/5 Faculty-Led  
Study Abroad  
2/5, 2/10, 2/19,  
2/26, 3/4, 3/11  
Employee  
Performance  
Management  
System  
Blackboard  
Training,  
various topics  
and times  
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<http://www2.wintrop.edu/login/tl/c/default.asp>

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## If Ignorance Is Bliss, We Sure Must Have a Lot of Happy People!: The Startling Decline in Cultural Literacy

Ever since I was a kid, I have been an avid watcher of *Jeopardy*. I go all the way back, to “Lakes and Rivers for \$20, Art.” One of my life goals is to be a contestant on the show. (I am taking the online test once again next week, so please wish me luck. And somebody please help me with geography!) On last night’s show, a very rare event occurred: nobody won! All three contestants bet all their money, but none of them knew the Final Jeopardy question. (I did: “What is Little Rock?”) So I consider myself a one-day champion, at least in my mind.) These were three very smart people, but the answer eluded them. (Then again, none of them knew the name of the artist whose 70s album was “All Things Must Pass.” Please!)

The event was so extraordinary that Charlie Rose talked about it this morning on the CBS Morning News. Either he or Nora O’Donnell or Gayle King later mentioned results of a survey in which 13% of

Americans think Judge Judy is a Supreme Court justice. Jaw-dropping, but it gets worse: 10% of college graduates think so, too. Oh my!

I was so astonished that I looked up the study online. The study is from the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, conducted in August 2015, based on 1,000 nationwide interviews. In addition to the questions above, a third of college graduates could not identify the Bill of Rights as part of the amendments to the Constitution, a third could not name a single one of the rights mentioned in the First Amendment, 46% did not know the election cycle of the Senate and House of Representatives, and 40% do not know that the Constitution gives Congress the right to declare war (perhaps understandable, since that has not happened in such a long time).

At that time, 32% believed John Boehner was the President of the Senate.

Alarming, 11% of respondents aged 25-34 believe the Constitution must be reauthorized every four years. (Can you imagine what a food fight that would be?)

Perhaps these findings will not be shocking to our colleagues in the Department of Political Science, who encounter and test the limits of our students’ knowledge every day. But such general lack of knowledge about information most of us think should be common to all of us, especially college graduates, cuts across disciplines. I learned long ago not to be surprised at what my students don’t know about literature and literary history (although I was taken more than a bit aback when not a single graduate student in my seminar last semester could explain why the Restoration was called the Restoration. When prodded further, they could not come up with the Puritans or Oliver Cromwell during the period just before.)

Many factors explain this

*“But I think most of us would agree that it really does matter that our students, especially by the time they graduate, should have command of a certain amount of knowledge in areas across the curriculum. That is why we, like most universities, have general education. That is why we were all so invested in the changes we made to our general education program two years ago. That is why so many of us devote ourselves to the education of students who are not our majors.”*



## Continued from page 1

decline in general cultural literacy, including but not limited to the internet. (Although some might argue that the internet has made the need for such knowledge obsolete—if you don't know something, you can look it up in an instant by looking on your phone, which is really a library. As José Antonio Bowen, author of the excellent book, *Teaching Naked*, wrote, “Students come to our classes bored and with an encyclopedia in their pockets.”)

But I think most of us would agree that it really does matter that our students, especially by the time they graduate, should have command of a certain amount of knowledge in areas across the curriculum. That is why we, like most universities, have general education. That is why we were all so invested in the changes we made to our general education program two years ago. That is why so many of us devote ourselves to the education of students who are not our majors.

(An aside: when I Googled the author of *Teaching Naked* just now, because I can never remember his name, I landed on his excellent website, which contains several videos and

resources and handouts. I want to study those more fully, and I will probably devote a future column to his ideas.) Here is the link: <http://teachingnaked.com/>

I went to the Donald Trump rally that was held recently on our campus. I went out of curiosity, wanting to see and experience a phenomenon in person that I have been watching on television and the internet and reading about in the press. I will try not to inject politics into this column, but I will say that I was more interested in the reaction of the crowd than in what Mr. Trump had to say. To say it felt like a mob is to do disservice to the concept of a mob. I left our coliseum shaken and frightened for our country and for my fellow citizens. I know polls tell us that most of The Donald's support comes from people without a college education, but those survey results from ACTA don't exactly give me much comfort about the knowledge and reasoning of the college educated.

The good old internet also brought me to a 2012 *New York Review of Books* opinion piece, “Age of Ignorance,” by Charles Simic, who writes these words that certainly apply to today's climate: “An educated, well-informed

population, the kind that a functioning democracy requires, would be difficult to lie to, and could not be led by the nose by the various vested interests running amok in this country. Most of our politicians and their political advisers and lobbyists would find themselves unemployed, and so would the gasbags who pass themselves off as our opinion makers. Luckily for them, nothing so catastrophic, even though perfectly well-deserved and widely-welcome, has a remote chance of occurring any time soon.”

Rather than despair, which might be a natural reaction, I feel even more invigorated by the challenge all this poses to do my little part in helping to form “an educated, well-informed population.” I realize that is my, and I suspect your, life work. As the Carolina Panthers say, “Keep pounding!”

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The deadline has now passed to register for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning, but there is still time if you hurry! The conference is going to be excellent, so please join us. The link to register is on the next page.



## Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

## A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or [birdj@winthrop.edu](mailto:birdj@winthrop.edu).

## Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a one-year subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session  
At

[www.winthrop.edu/tlc](http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc)

## The 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Saturday, February 6, 2016 we will have our 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning. Register on the TLC website:

<http://www.winthrop.edu/tlc/>

## Thought For the Week

"I would rather have my ignorance than another man's knowledge, because I have so much more of it."  
--Mark Twain