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Solving Illiteracy, One Essay at a Time

APA Format

M. J. Halco

Jonathan Kozol’s “The Human Cost of an Illiterate Society” makes a heroic, yet ineffective, attempt to educate the general public about a serious and legitimate problem in our society that must be addressed: illiteracy. Kozol’s approach to the problem of illiteracy, however, is overly dramatic, disgruntled, and immature.

Kozol begins by copying a warning from a can of “Drano,” simply to iterate how dangerous it is that illiterates cannot read the precautions listed. He then jumps into the first paragraph of his essay, with no further regard to the warning. This is this first of many follies that make Kozol appear arrogant. His introduction sets the tone for the rest of the piece with its lofty language:

We are speaking here no longer of the dangers faced by passengers on Eastern Airlines or the dollar costs incurred by the U.S corporations and taxpayers. We are speaking now of human suffering and of the ethical dilemmas that are faced by a society that looks upon suffering with qualified concern but does not take those actions that its wealth and ingenuity would seemingly demand (1985, p. 253).

This paragraph exemplifies the condescending tone the author employs through terms such as “incurred,” “ethical dilemmas,” and “ingenuity,” which give the reader the impression that Kozol is writing down to the reader. If he were to take the position of a colleague, treating the readers as his equals rather than as an ignorant mob, his essay would be more effective. Kozol consistently employs these condescending tones, as in this passage: “Unaware of their rights, incognizant of jargon, intimidated by the unfamiliar fear…” (p. 254). “Incognizant of jargon” alone is enough to sound arrogant, but surrounding it with other such phrases only amplifies its effect.

Kozol continues to demonstrate an overly dramatic air with vocabulary such as “Tragedy looms larger than farce in the United States today” (p. 253). The reader feels as if she is listening to a comic book narrator. Illiteracy is certainly a serious problem, but painting images of Dr. Tragedy
battling Captain Farce is not quite the call-to-action needed. A serious problem deserves a serious approach.

Kozol further attempts to depict the fear of the unknown that the illiterate face, but once again takes it too far: “Even the hard, cold stars within firmament above one’s head begin to mock the possibilities for self-location. Where am I? Where did I come from? Where will I go?” (p. 257). Firmament? For someone who is writing on behalf of those who cannot understand the simplest of written words, he sure seems fond of stuffy, pretentious language.

Another of Kozol’s rhetorical strategies is the use of repetition to drive home a point that needed no help. He provides a string of sentences that begin, “Illiterates cannot,” listing various everyday tasks and experiences that are denied illiterates due to their inability to read. Also repetitive, although not as an intended rhetorical device, is the use of the word “illiterate.” With such repetitive use, the word gains a stigma, becomes almost a slur. His use of the term is completely counter-productive, provided his intent with the essay is to raise awareness of the problems of illiteracy in order to address them.

Without a doubt, Kozol’s point is a legitimate one, yet his methods seem rather extreme. For instance, at one point he states, “Socrates could not have had in mind the moral compromise peculiar to a nation like our own” (p. 253). I believe it’s too bold to state one way or another what an ancient Greek philosopher had in mind, and once again, Kozol appears overly confident.

Kozol also provides an anecdote about an illiterate woman in Washington DC who could not read her bills or write checks to pay them. I would very much like to know how she acquired the checks, how she intended to use them, and how she earned the money to spend. I cannot imagine a single situation that does not involve reading something. Kozol also claims that illiterates are deprived of the choice of brand name versus generic brand products in stores. While I still have difficulty imagining a scenario in which one who cannot read earns money, I do not believe this claim. According to Kozol, illiterates must rely upon pictures and logos of brand names. Could they not simply match either the product itself (for example, on a package of bacon, you can still see the product through the wrapping regardless of the brand), or look at the patterns of the letters on the packages and find its generic brand equivalent? They are not blind; those who lack the skill to read are perfectly capable of recognizing patterns. In fact, I’m sure that’s how many of them travel. They recognize
the pattern of letters on street signs, and while they may not understand them, they recognize them.

Kozol’s essay is, overall, ineffective. His rhetoric reflects his arrogance and pompous attitude. His examples are full of gaps, and he does not, at any point, propose a solution to this grave situation. He complains and simply provides a series of anecdotes, droning on about a point that could have come across with fewer words. These rhetorical shortcomings culminate in an essay that is, at best, laughable. Perhaps if he would change his tone, his plea would fall on more welcoming ears. As it stands, his readers have as good a chance of understanding him as one of the illiterates he stigmatizes.

References