

Emotion versus facts  
in "the human cost of  
an illiterate society"



In Jonathan Kozol's essay "The Human Cost of an Illiterate Society" Kozol relies on tugging on the reader's heartstrings rather than presenting the statistics that would prove his point without a shadow of a doubt. In the end readers are left thinking "why should I care so much about the illiterate?" That being said, Kozol strikingly relates to the reader the many things that an illiterate person cannot do on a day to day basis. His accounts of illiteracy are shocking and heartbreaking to read about, but without the solidity of facts and statistics, the reader has a great emotional response but does not know what to do about it. One of the first things Kozol presents to us is something that we have all encountered before. The warning label on a seemingly innocuous can of Drano. He wants the reader to think of not only the dangers to society due to the illiterate, which he illustrates a little later in his essay, but of the danger to themselves and their children.

They cannot read this label therefore they are putting themselves at risk of poisoning, skin damage and blindness. This is only the first example of him using the tactic of provoking an emotional response rather than looking plainly at the facts. The next thing Kozol does to make clear the cost of the illiterate society is to quote James Madison, "A People who mean to be their own governors, must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives. A popular government without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both. Kozol states that illiterate citizens vote rarely, and when they do happen to vote, their vote is somehow less because of the simple fact that they cannot read, putting forth the idea that illiterate voters "vote for a face, a smile, or a style, not for a mind or character or body of beliefs." He follows these

statements with the one and only statistical statement in the essay, " The number of illiterate adults exceeds by 16 million the entire vote cast for the winner in the 1980 presidential contest.

If even one third of all illiterates could vote, and read enough and do sufficient math to vote in their self-interest, Ronald Regan would not likely have been chosen president. " Of course that statement is only part fact. The rest of the statement uses the broad assumption that if the illiterate of the country were able to truly vote their conscience that they would not have voted Ronald Regan into office. Kozol uses the phrase " Illiterates cannot" throughout his essay to great effect. The continuous listing of what illiterate people cannot do is astounding to say the least.

Illiterates cannot read a menu, read letters from their children's teachers, read instructions on anything including medicine bottles and possibly hazardous cleaning materials, illiterate persons cannot read the bills they need to pay and then write the checks to pay them. His repetitiveness really drives home the point that " illiterates cannot" do the things that we as literate citizens take for granted every day. The point that he is trying to make is that illiterates will never be able to function normally in society. They are at the complete mercy of the people around them, the mercy of the people who read the letters and bills to them, or the mercy of their dining companions who end up having to order for them. Throughout the essay Kozol relies on anonymous quotes to lead from one problem to the next.

Quotes that are anonymous, however, do nothing but feed the fire of the emotional response to the essay rather than incontrovertibly prove his point

of the dysfunction of illiterates in a literate society. Quotes such as “ They are cheating me...I have been tricked...I do not know...” and “ I’ve lost a lot of jobs. Today, even if you’re a janitor, there’s still reading and writing... they leave a note saying, ‘ Go to room so -and-so...’ You can’t do it. You can’t read it. You don’t know.

” Understandably the illiterate do not want to be identified due to the possible ridicule and judgments that would almost invariably come their way, but giving a face to some of these quotes would boost Kozol’s credibility tenfold. In another part of his essay, Kozol relates the tale of a few women he has known in Boston entering a hospital for a supposedly routine tubal ligation only to recover and emerge from the hospital with a complete hysterectomy. He claims that they were “ unaware of their rights, incognizant of jargon, intimidated by the unfamiliar air of fear and atmosphere of ether that so many of us find oppressive in the confines even of the most attractive and expensive medical facilities, they have signed their names to documents they could not read and which nobody, in the hectic situation that prevails so often in those overcrowded hospitals that serve the urban poor, had even bothered to explain. ” He begs us to pity these people who are members of the most unfortunate of societies groups, the poor and uneducated illiterate who do not have an advocate to stand for them. Nowhere in the essay does Kozol attempt to tell the reader why they should have these emotional responses other than because they are sad stories about poor unfortunate souls who cannot read.

Nowhere in the essay is there a call to action, a means to help the illiterate of society. These people are trapped in a world where nothing makes sense  
<https://assignbuster.com/emotion-versus-facts-in-the-human-cost-of-an-illiterate-society/>

to them. So what do we, as literate persons, do to help them? Kozol never tries to answer any of the questions he puts forth in his essay further damaging the effectiveness of his writing because the readers are left with a feeling of emptiness and a feeling of helplessness. Some people may argue that the essay is effective because it does achieve that emotional response. The essay makes readers feel sorry for these people and want to DO something to help correct the problem. But, the lack of statistical fact to back up his claims and not putting a face to the problem of illiteracy makes this essay much less effective than it could possibly be.

Works Cited Kozol, Jonathan " The Human Cost of an Illiterate Society" The Arlington Reader: Contexts and Connections pgs. 274-280.