

From the Kitchen

15 June 2011



There are some very worrying indications that most people have given up thinking. Andy Bilchbaum and Mike Bonanno, who some years ago made up ‘the Yes Men’¹, gave addresses to august bodies, including the WTO (World Trade Organisation). In their presentations they made outrageous suggestions and claims, and those in the audience responded with nodding heads and even acclaim. No-one in the audience was thinking – no-one asked questions or challenged the impersonators.

We should all be very concerned about this because these are the people (the gathered audience, not ‘the Yes Men’) who make important decisions on our behalf. Theirs are discussions that lead to actions which shape societies, countries and (often) the whole global community. These are the people whose decisions should be questioned more carefully for the very reason that they have such an impact. Many of their decisions lead to results that are very difficult to reverse or undo when it finally appears that they are not the results we want.

That these ‘powerful’ people can apparently accept as truth a presentation that is designed and presented as satire, is of grave concern – they apparently accepted it uncritically. This makes it imperative that *we* critically question anything that comes out of organisations such as the WTO.

We are born to think and to question. Anyone who has ever spent time with a young child will have been fascinated (and perhaps eventually exasperated) by this little person’s ability to ask “why?” in a seemingly endless stream. Young people also ask “when?” and “where?” and “what?” and “how?”. Their thirst for answers seems inexhaustible. And it may even appear that they are more interested in the process of asking questions than in the answers they receive. Most young people learn that the same questions may elicit different answers depending on who they ask, how they ask, even when they ask. In other words, answers can depend on circumstances.

Babies are born knowing nothing. They need to learn about the world and their relation to it. One way of doing this is asking questions, when they have language. Changes in circumstances will prompt more questions as will a growing understanding and appreciation of the world.

Most children have an innate wisdom, uncluttered by facts. They explore through all their senses and through asking questions of those around them. Somewhere in their experience of school, most children seem to replace questioning with knowing and, in the process, move from a state of excitement to one of safety. They give up the fun of the journey for the safety of the destination – a destination usually chosen for them by other people.

At some point, whether because parents become exasperated or teachers need to get on with teaching facts, the questioners are made to understand that it is not right to keep asking questions. They are taught that the world is a certain way and that this is to be accepted.

The word 'education' comes from a Latin root that means 'to draw out'. Educating people should be about drawing out of them ideas and approaches to the world and helping them to make sense of these in relation to people, things and events around them. Education should also be about drawing out questions and helping the enquirer understand the relevance of the questions to circumstances and the relevance and usefulness of any answers. Education should not be about stuffing people's minds full of facts and information which stifles their ability and willingness to think.

It needs to be made clear to young people that there is great power in asking questions and that there is wisdom to be found in dealing with the answers in a way that furthers that person's wellbeing, happiness and fulfilment. The shame needs to be taken out of not knowing – what most people don't know is far greater than what they do know, but they are either unaware of this or won't admit to it. Our schools make currency of facts and knowledge, whereas the true currency should be the ability to ask useful and powerful questions; and not as a competition to see who can ask the most questions that others cannot answer. One useful question for a student to ask of a teacher is, "Why are we learning *this* and not something else?"

What can we learn about the process of education by looking at the 'knowledge' which is judged to be important and that which is discarded? We can certainly learn from the failure of 'educated' people in important positions to question two men offering them absolute garbage with straight faces – accepting it with straight faces and not seeing it as garbage.

1. see for instance the article in [Wikipedia](#).

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[In the next posting I will continue this enquiry.]