

The cost of seeming to know

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It is Teacher's Day again. And I find myself wondering what exactly we have become so good at celebrating. We celebrate teachers, quite rightly. We speak of mentors and guides, of lives changed and futures shaped. We put up photographs, write messages, remember names. There is something deeply human in wanting to acknowledge those who taught us something. But I wonder whether I have become less interested in the figure of the teacher, and more interested in what [teaching](#) leaves behind. Because information is no longer scarce. In fact, it may be the opposite. There is now more information available to us than any teacher could possibly hope to give a student.

Answers arrive before questions have properly formed. Explanations are available before we have had time to wonder about the problem. What seems to be becoming scarce is something else. Discernment. I think about this more often than I used to. To know something is not quite the same as knowing what deserves to be known. To have an [opinion](#) is not the same as having thought. To be informed is not necessarily to understand. And, increasingly, to appear thoughtful is

remarkably easy. Perhaps technology has something to do with this. Not because technology makes us less intelligent. It has done the opposite in so many ways: it has enlarged what we can know, make, discover and communicate. But it has also made it extraordinarily easy to display the signs of knowing.

We can display what we have read. What we care about. What we believe. What causes we support. What communities we belong to. Sometimes the position arrives before the thought behind it. Sometimes the answer arrives before the question has been understood. Sometimes an impression of expertise travels much faster than expertise itself. I don't think this is necessarily deception. That would be too easy an explanation. Perhaps we have simply become accustomed to recognising the signs of things. And this is where I have begun to think differently about tokenism. We usually use the word to describe symbolic inclusion: someone is placed on a panel, a committee, a board or an advertisement so that an institution can demonstrate that it has included the right person.

But perhaps tokenism is a larger problem. Perhaps it begins whenever the symbol of something becomes an acceptable substitute for the thing itself. Participation can become a substitute for contribution. Representation can become a substitute for influence. An announcement can become a substitute for achievement. The language of thought can become a substitute for thinking. I wonder whether we notice this because the appearances are often convincing. We know what an accomplished scholar is supposed to sound like. We know what an innovative organisation is supposed to announce.

We know what an enlightened institution is supposed to say. We know what an engaged citizen is expected to signal. And once the signals become familiar, perhaps it becomes possible to reproduce them without reproducing the substance. That thought makes me uncomfortable because it does not belong only to universities. It belongs to public life. A society that becomes less able to distinguish appearance from substance can begin to accept symbolic reform in place of reform, representation in place of participation, political performance in place of governing competence.

And perhaps the greatest cost is not always visible. It is time. Money can sometimes be recovered. Institutions can sometimes be rebuilt. Policies can sometimes be corrected. But nobody gives a person back the years lost to a bad institution or a bad decision. A child does not recover the years in which an [education](#) system failed her. A researcher does not recover the years lost to an institution that could not support good work. A patient does not recover time lost waiting for a system that promised more than it could deliver. Bad decisions consume human time. Bad institutions consume human possibility. Perhaps this is why discernment is not merely an intellectual virtue.

It is a public resource. And perhaps this is also why I am reluctant to confine the idea of a teacher to a classroom. The person who teaches us to think may be a schoolteacher or a professor. But it may just as well be a coach who notices why a player keeps making the same mistake. A tutor who takes a student's apparently simple doubt seriously. A parent who does not dismiss a child's strange question. A craftsperson whose knowledge has come from years of attentive practice rather than formal education.

I have never thought that knowledge belonged only to people with credentials. Some of the most valuable knowledge people possess has never been written into a textbook. And the converse is also true. A credential does not, by itself, make a person a participant in knowledge production. That is not an argument against expertise. Expertise matters. It represents sustained attention to something. But expertise is not status, and status is not contribution. Perhaps thinking is much more ordinary than we sometimes make it sound. It may simply begin with asking: Does this make sense? How do we know? What are we missing? What if I am wrong? These are not questions reserved for intellectuals. They belong to anyone willing to take the world seriously.

A scholar, perhaps, has a particular responsibility to practise them because whatever enters the world as knowledge does not remain entirely the scholar's own. Someone else will read it. Someone else may rely on it. Someone else may build upon it. Knowledge has an ecology. What enters that ecology matters. I have become increasingly wary of the idea that intellectual life is necessarily about being impressive. It

seems to me that its more serious obligation is almost the opposite: to remain capable of looking again. To investigate what seems obvious. To tolerate not knowing. To change one's mind when something better is discovered. To resist the ease of saying something simply because it sounds right. And perhaps, sometimes, to be willing not to be applauded.

This is not a claim to moral superiority. It is simply what thinking requires. Perhaps that is also what I value most in those who have taught me – not that they gave me answers, but that they made it harder for me to accept an answer without examining it. And perhaps that is the quiet contribution of [teaching](#), wherever it occurs. Not the production of people who know everything. Not even the production of people who remember everything they were taught. But the cultivation of people who are a little less easily impressed by appearances, a little more willing to ask another question, and a little more capable of recognising when something is substantial and when it merely looks so.

I think about this on Teacher's Day because the question seems larger than teaching. It is about the kind of society we are becoming. A society can produce enormous quantities of information and still become poorer in judgement. It can produce more credentials and less expertise. More participation and less contribution. More visibility and less substance. Perhaps the real danger is not that we will stop thinking altogether. Perhaps it is that we will become sufficiently comfortable with the appearance of thinking that we will no longer notice the difference.

And if that happens, what we lose will not simply be intellectual rigour. We will lose time. We will lose judgement. We will lose the ability to recognise what is worth building upon. That is why I keep returning to the teacher – not as a figure on a pedestal, but as one of the many people through whom a human capacity can be kept alive. The capacity to notice. To question. To listen. To think again. And, eventually, to know the difference between knowing and merely seeming to know.

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