

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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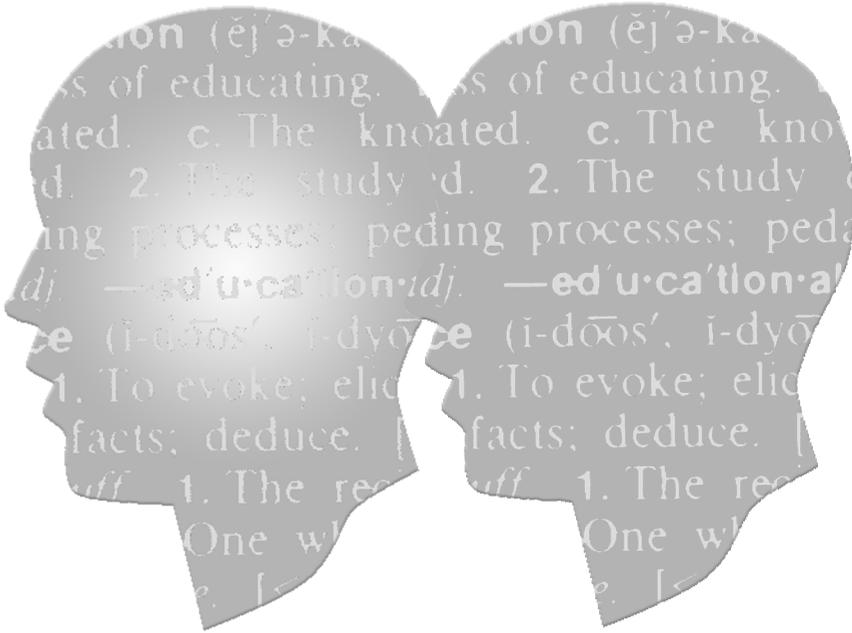
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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CONTENTS

Deborah Witte	Foreword	1
Leonard Cassuto	Inside the Graduate School Mess: An Interview	6
David Brown	Assumptions, Variables, and Ignorance	15
Telma Gimenez	Deliberation and Institutional Political Cultures: A Brazilian Perspective	21
Denis Makarov	An Island of Deliberation in an Authoritarian Environment: The Case of Russia	27
Etana Jacobi	<i>Publicly Engaged Scholars: Next-Generation Engagement and the Future of Higher Education</i> Edited by Margaret A. Post, Elaine Ward, Nicholas V. Longo, and John Saltmarsh	37
David Mathews	Afterword: Citizens in a Global Society	43
Contributors		50

ASSUMPTIONS, VARIABLES, AND IGNORANCE

David W. Brown

The following is an excerpt from David Brown's manuscript Assumptions of the Tea Party Movement: A World of Their Own, published last year by Palgrave Macmillan. Brown's work about "assumptions" extends far beyond Tea Partiers to include prevailing assumptions among those with a liberal mindset, as well as those in the news media and academe. In this excerpt from Chapter 1, Brown argues that, "what all such folk have in common is ignorance and their preference for limiting the number of variables in order to deal with their ignorance. They prefer to tame the overwhelming complexity and complications of existence in these modern times by not letting too many variables make them hopelessly incoherent to themselves and others."

Assumptions are unavoidable because ignorance is unavoidable, and limiting the number of variables is one way to deal with ignorance. What most assumptions share is an often-unacknowledged desire of those who use them to limit the number of variables that may threaten the supposed "truth" of their assumptions. For example, too many variables are likely to undermine a liberal's assumption that government leaders and experts are the most likely people to solve our social problems; similarly, acknowledging a list of variables can make a news story confusing and inconclusive. When journalists and social commentators try to make sense of what often is inexplicable, their stories may end up being far from sensible. It's only natural to minimize the number of variables to support an assumption that whatever happened has an explanation, but in doing so they often ignore the messy process, the trial and error that produced an outcome. And too many variables threaten the strict and narrow path that rational choice theorists in academe use to get from point A to point B. As I discussed in a previous book entitled *The Real Change Makers*, unfortunately, those with one expertise or another tame what, to them, is an unmanageable number of variables, only to distort how social problems can be addressed. They often give undue weight to those variables they can quantify and incorrectly mistake numbers for cold, hard fact. Furthermore, they like to bend problems to fit within their particular expertise, and they often ignore those parts that lie beyond their training and experience. With such a reductionist approach, they prefer to draw a straight line from problem to answer. It's easy enough to draw that line in a PowerPoint presentation, but awfully hard to follow it in the real world when so many players, events, and unpredictable happenings push the answer off course. So even when Tea Party assumptions may put Tea Partiers in a world of their own, such reductionist thinking is

common throughout American culture, from liberal pro-government elites to the media, scrambling for coherent explanations of events that are otherwise inexplicable, and to academic precincts where those in their disciplinary silos promote theory that may defy or deny the complexity of the real world. Assumptions are important for almost everyone, whether a liberal-oriented professional, a media maven, an academic, or anyone trying to make his or her way in a complicated world that yields very few easy answers for anyone.

When one concedes to unavoidable ignorance, opportunities arise that can encourage the “amateur” in anyone to think and explore.

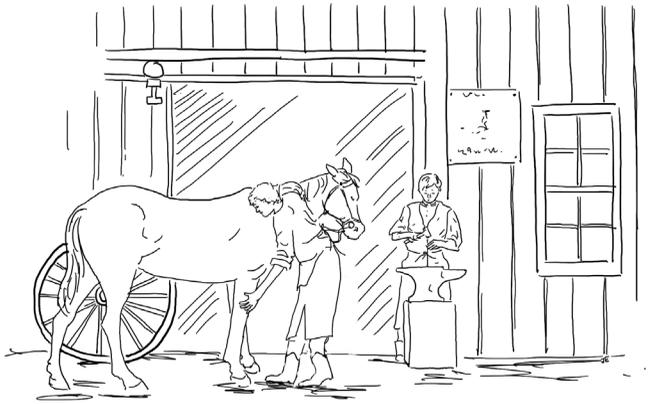
Another way to deal with ignorance is by using credentials as a form of occupational pretension, separating those who are supposedly in the know from those who don't have creden-

tials. Occupational pretension arises in any situation where the assumed possession of critical information, or the authority of such knowledge, rests on the occupational positions reserved for it. Think of the flourish of degrees in psychology, medicine, nutrition, economics, education, botany, law, or sociology that appear in solicitations through the mail or online, on book jackets or in guest columns in a newspaper. They offer the promise of knowledge, not necessarily by what they actually tell a reader, but by what their credentials imply. The pretension is inescapable, as it is based on the assumption that credentials are enough to deliver consumers from their own failures and confusion. Randall Collins offered an interesting discussion of the problem of occupational pretension. Collins' thesis proposed that “the great majority of jobs can be learned through practice by almost any literate person” (Collins, 54, 90). But to avoid the competition that such an insight implies, we have, instead, reserved places in organizations for those who acquire a credential in advance. For Collins, such credentials have built up a “sinecure sector,” where people gain occupational status and income not because of any meritocratic principle but rather on the mere strength of their credential. They assume that someone else knows better, knows more; it is a form of consolation. Walker Percy, however, argued that the “caste of the layman-expert is not the fault of the expert. It is due altogether to the eager surrender of sovereignty by the layman so that he may take up the role not of the person but of the consumer” (Percy, 54).

The acknowledgement of ignorance is a healthy precondition for learning, but it is precisely what is missing by too many credential seekers who assume

that ignorance is something that can be covered over with the fix of higher education or the rituals of on-the-job training. While ignorance is a permanent condition, not to be hidden by a credential, ignorance *can* be the spur for long-lasting intellectual engagement. When one concedes to unavoidable ignorance, opportunities arise that can encourage the “amateur” in anyone to think and explore. The professionalization of knowledge need not be the enemy of amateur curiosity and inquiry. The personal interests of the amateur need not be abandoned in the rush to master knowledge that provides an occupational identity. There is vast room for the questions of both the amateur and the professional. The professional’s questions do not acknowledge a personal stake in the answer sought. The amateur’s questions, on the other hand, are asked for primarily personal reasons. This is a paraphrase from Christopher Jencks and David Riesman in *The Academic Revolution*. This distinction accounts for the differing notions of inquiry and learning between the professional and the amateur in the same person. Amateurs, however, can apply their personal values and pass judgment on what they consider useless or trivial in specialist fields in which they do not take part. Furthermore, their own professional lives may not yield significant meanings, which is all the more reason why they can still attend to amateur questions that may lead to far richer intellectual territory than their more narrow professional turf. The amateur impulse to ask questions for personal reasons remains a valuable resource regardless of one’s professional occupation. Ignorance can direct learning by seeking credible grounds for what an amateur most wants to know—for what an amateur most wants to believe. “The process of examining any topic is both an exploration of the topic, and the exegesis of our fundamental beliefs in light of which we approach it; a dialectical combination of exploration and exegesis” (Polanyi, 267). Yes, we can assume the truth of new knowledge, and, yes, we can hope to benefit from its application, but the secular faith in those salvageable values hardly constructs a durable, personal meaning. It is one reason why Tea Partiers—and so many others—make assumptions that help construct durable, personal meanings grounded in American history and religious faith.

How America has changed. Once we defended ignorance, and now we go to great lengths to hide it. In 18th- and 19th-century villages and towns, Americans shared a homespun philosophy that boasted of the common sense of the common man. They had a firm grasp of what they knew, and more important, what they needed to know. Their claim to knowledge was modest, but it made little difference because the needs of their community were modest. What was necessary to know about occupations was accessible to most everyone.



Tanning, spinning, repairing tools, the work of the miller, the blacksmith, the farmer—each found a niche in a simple division of labor, but most everyone retained a general understanding of the nature and skills of

what others' occupations were about. Robert Wiebe describes an earlier age when "every man could manage every task, no one acquired prestige from any job" (Wiebe, 113). However, America's tight little communities gradually lost their hold. A national society was rapidly forming, and the division of mental labor soon arose to serve needs remote from any particular community. Some neighbors and friends moved away and staked a claim in the cities, and in new universities, new corporations, and public bureaucracies. Those left behind could no longer claim to know the same things as those putting distance between their origins and the booming, booster society that was becoming their new home. Americans still defended their common sense, but their confidence was a bit shaken. Ignorance seemed more and more a liability. Many Americans traveled a long way from their self-contained communities and there was no going back, despite their continued affection for the past.

Notwithstanding everyone's limited knowledge, which was more defensible in an earlier era, it seems no less defensible now. The division of mental labor will no doubt continue, and credentialism will not soon disappear, but it is still possible to educate young people to prosper. Such education is the best defense against pretension—their own, as well as the pretension of others. Alfred North Whitehead said a problem for education is "how to produce the expert without loss of the essential virtues of the amateur" (Whitehead, 13). There should be concern when the values of professional specialists are at the heart of how they "educate." When their students appropriate such values, the temptation is to let "professionalism" be the source—and limit—of their identity, too often at the expense of their intellectual and moral growth. That leaves too much out of what each individual can learn and contribute. The virtue of amateurs is that they can consider learning an end in itself. It is harder for

students to develop a life-long interest in learning if they are “educated” by academic specialists who maintain civility among themselves and their respective disciplines at the expense of intellectual engagement. The example of professional deference does not encourage students to acquire the habit of looking for themselves in any field of knowledge. The virtue of amateurs is that they offer themselves rather than their credentials. It is far more difficult for students to develop their moral

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sensibilities if their academic mentors give the impression that a “real professional” is only concerned with the quality of his knowledge and performance. For too many, professional detachment often becomes a kind of ethic—a substitution for one’s personal values. What America needs instead are exemplary leaders who can work across various fields of knowledge, citizens—credentialed or not—who can make an avocation of looking for themselves at the broad range of technical and scientific issues on the public’s agenda, and “consumers” who are ready to challenge the pretension inherent in the offer and sale of “expert” advice.

We are all amateurs—students, teachers, and all professional specialists—with respect to most knowledge. “Science began originally as a determination to rely on one’s own eyes instead of on the ancients or upon ecclesiastical authority or pure logic. That is, it was originally just a kind of looking for oneself rather than trusting anyone else’s preconceived ideas” (Maslow, 151). The abundant production of knowledge, resulting from the division of mental labor, has obscured the obvious—that ignorance, not knowledge, has been the inspiration for such an enterprise. Intellectual ambitions have always been driven by what a person doesn’t know or what he disputes that others think they know” (Brown, 51).



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