

## WOKs in the world

Beyond school, reflection on the nature, strengths and weaknesses of the various WOKs can help you think more critically in everyday life. Consider the following examples:

- You are trying to decide which university to attend and wonder whether you should trust your intuitions.
- A friend is describing a shared experience and you find yourself saying 'That's not how I remember it.'
- You listen to a politician making a speech and suspect that her argument is flawed.
- You misinterpret something a friend says and start thinking about the ambiguity of language.
- You are frightened of flying and you wonder whether your fear is rational or irrational.
- An eye-witness claims to have seen a UFO, but you think their senses must have deceived them.
- You attribute a fellow student's indifference to other people's feelings to their lack of imagination.
- A close friend is accused of shoplifting, but you have faith that they did not do it.

Some striking stories are told of expectation as a particularly strong influence upon perception. A group of medical students, told to listen closely to the opening and closing sounds of a patient's heart valve, succeeded in hearing it. Their instructor then revealed that their stethoscopes were stuffed with cotton wool and inoperative. Their lesson was not on the valve of the heart, but on the need to be on guard against imagining hearing what they expected to hear, and against reporting what they thought the rest of the group heard and the instructor expected them to hear. This story may ring true to any student doing a lab who is helped considerably by knowing in advance what the results are supposed to be. It may also sound familiar to anyone knowing the story of the emperor's new clothes.

A similar account is made of the explorer Columbus, setting out from Spain in 1492, and expecting to encounter the humanoid monsters who were believed to live beyond the limits of the known world. The Native Americans he actually met clearly did not fit his expectations, so he gave their appearance considerable attention in his records. Yet he persisted in his inquiries about humanoid monsters, and recorded reports that seemed to fit, for example descriptions of human beings with tails. "The tales to which Columbus paid attention, and the manner in which he interpreted them, undoubtedly reflected both his expectations and his hopes. The poor communication between Columbus and the Indians...gave him considerable leeway in imposing his own meanings on the Indians' stories."<sup>6</sup> In listening for stories of monsters and even seeking them out, Columbus was not particularly foolish. He was merely responding in context of the beliefs of his culture and historical time.

What we perceive, ultimately, is much affected not just by what is there but by who we are, biologically, personally, and culturally. Perhaps, metaphorically, the zebra will always tend to see in black and white and the elephant will always tend to see in grey. Who, after all, is doing the perceiving? Who, once again, is in the centre?

