

I Know Everything Already

The measure of a wise person is the ability to entertain new ideas without necessarily having to accept them.

—Aristotle

Several years ago I was teaching a freshman-level class on critical inquiry and expression. Among other things, the course required students to explore their world with a critical eye focused through a lens of multiculturalism.

One of the first assignments was for the students to write a short paper about an experience that had taught them something significant. There was great variety in the quality of the finished products, with many of the papers well written and others . . . let's just say I ran out of ink marking them up.

Several of the papers are still clear in my memory, not because they were terrific but because they illustrated some of the ways in which first-year students' brains are hardwired. The paper that taught me the most

was one submitted by a young woman. I don't remember exactly what she wrote about, but the story involved a football game and a corsage made of chrysanthemums—you know, pom-poms.

I recall that I wrote a lot on this particular paper. What struck me most were all the times I had to circle spelling errors, mainly the misspelling of *pom-poms*, which the young woman had spelled with an *n*, as in *pom-pons*.

Shortly after I returned the papers to the class, the student who had written the “pom-pons” paper approached me. She pointed to all the times I had circled *pom-pons* and asked, “What’s wrong with that?” I told her that the word was misspelled, and she countered that *pom-pons* was a correct alternate (read: “diverse”) spelling.

“How dare she argue with me,” I thought. Doesn’t she know that the three letters following my name, PhD, make me an expert—about everything, including the spelling of *pom-poms*? Obviously, she couldn’t care less about the PhD that I had worked so hard to get. I could have had MA, BA, ESPN, NBC, CNN, SBC, AAA, or NBA after my name. To her, the letters might make me an expert in some areas, but not in flowers. She probably was thinking there should be a four-letter word following my name.

As she continued to protest, I dug in deeper. My pom-pom fortress would not crumble or crack, especially under pressure from this bothersome freshman gnat. Didn’t she know that I had won my district’s spelling bee as a third grader? As I tried to shoo her away, she reached into her book bag. Thoughts flashed through my mind about psycho students who shoot their professors over a poor grade. Could this be about to happen? After fumbling in her bag for what seemed like minutes, she drew her weapon. “Here’s a dictionary. Look it up if you don’t believe me.”

With great confidence, I began paging through the book, all the while picturing her forthcoming apology for questioning me. “There,” I said, “it’s *pom-pom*.”

She looked at me with surprise. "Are you sure?"

Just to appease her, I pointed to the word and said, "See for yourself."

She looked more closely at the dictionary, then eyed me with disgust. "According to this dictionary, another correct spelling is *pom-pon*."

I looked again. She was right. It could be spelled with an *n*. Though the evidence was right there in front of me, I didn't want to believe it. "Must be a mistake," I thought. How could I be wrong? Had the young woman published her own dictionary in her quest for a better grade? Although I wasn't 100 percent convinced, I told the student I would reassess her paper. And I went back to my office to check my own dictionary. It, too, had the "wrong" spelling as an alternative.

My certainty was shaken by this young whippersnapper, who basically had told me, "Hey, stupid, the world is round, not flat!" In the end, I had to admit that I was wrong. The world is indeed round. In wondering about how I could have been wrong all those years, I realized that I had never in my life heard anyone say *pom-pon*. I had only heard the word pronounced *pom-pom*. Maybe someone has said *pom-pon* to me, but I filtered it into *pom-pom*. People who had "taught" me didn't include an alternate possibility and passed their narrow view on to me.

What Are You Misspelling?

"You don't know what you don't know." I'm sure you've heard that saying before. It certainly makes sense that you can't know something of which you have no knowledge. The problem is that often we *think* we know more than we actually do. Or, worse, we believe that the limited knowledge we have about something is comprehensive and, moreover, that it's absolutely true. When challenged, we resist the notion that we could be wrong. "It can't be that way," we say to ourselves. "That's not what I learned."

In that embarrassing story about the pom-poms is a lesson about the need to emphasize our curiosity about the world and other people while minimizing our certainty about things we think we know. There is also a lesson about how ignorance and arrogance make a formidable duo that prevents us from exploring new perspectives and ideas.

When it comes to our ideas about people, is it possible that we hold information that we believe to be true when in fact it's greatly distorted? Could it be that we live sheltered from people who are different from us, which has led us to believe "pom-poms" about others when in fact the reality could easily be "pom-poms"?

The natural thing for us to do when our world is being challenged is defend our turf. On gender issues, I've heard more than once, "We don't have any women in leadership positions, but we aren't sexist. Everyone here has the same opportunities." Then, when challenged further, we come up with a great rationalization for our position: "Women just haven't been in the workplace as long as men," as if every man in leadership has worked a long time to achieve that position. It couldn't be true that males have developed a structure and network that, for the most part, hinders the advancement of women. We tell women that they just need to work harder. Or we tell them not to have kids, or that they are too emotional and read too much into things. Nope, it couldn't be that the "real" world is a little different from the tidy little world we have in our mind. After all, it's *pom-poms*, right?

That incident taught me that some parts, potentially many parts, of my knowledge base may have faulty data, that I may have been given bad information throughout my life. That realization is tough to accept because it forces me to question much of the information I have about my world. I have to start asking myself, "Where did I learn that? Was the source credible? Have I been exposed to different perspectives? Am I too arrogant to admit that I could be wrong, or that I am wrong? Am I willing to step

out of my comfort zone to grow?" In an age of technology, when we have access to many types of information from myriad sources, we often still gravitate to what is familiar, to what "speaks our language" and doesn't challenge us much. And therein lies the trap: Our quest for comfort and stability makes us defensive in the face of new and different ideas.

So how will you and your organization react when the "new" and the "different" are no longer easily ignored? Will you open up to other possibilities, though it may initially cause embarrassment or even pain? Or will you be like the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century leaders who stood by their position even in the face of evidence that Earth revolves around the sun, not the other way around?

My challenge to those of us who tend to be certain about our world is this: Minimize certainty and maximize curiosity, especially when it comes to people and ideas with which we have very little interaction. There is much to learn from being more curious.

By the way, are you supposed to capitalize *pom-poms*?