

You're fat and you know you are, says Hugh Greenway

I'm not talking about over-indulgence or putting on a few seasonal pounds around your midriff. I'm talking about fat in the head.

You are mentally obese.

You have become lazy, uncritical and intellectually flaccid. You let other people do your thinking for you and accept what you are told without question.

Before you get too upset, I should also add that so am I. But I am trying to do something about it. Hence my metaphorical slap around your chops. The reason I am doing it now is that I think the risks of our increasing collective fat-headedness will become apparent as the year progresses.

This will be an unpleasant year for many in business and, for many of those in the commercial L&D industry, it will really suck. Blue chips will reduce their spending on L&D by between 25 and 50 per cent and many SMEs will stop training altogether. And before you mention all the articles on the Internet or in the press showing how companies who invest in their people in a downturn emerge stronger at the end, I will accept that some of this may be true but not enough for the industry to survive in its current format.

So, if companies stop or significantly reduce their spending on L&D, where will people in jobs learn new skills? Will the rate of change conveniently slow down while the recession is on? Will the world considerably stop turning until we are out of the downturn? You don't need me to answer these questions, do you?

Each of us will be forced to learn for ourselves, which brings me back to my original point. We aren't very good at it any more. We have become accustomed to being spoon fed information, skills, opinions and beliefs. I wonder if, like domesticated animals, we may have lost the ability to hunt for new ideas or skills on our own.

I attended a think tank last year that addressed the future of state education in this country. A

number of people were bemoaning the fact that India and China are turning out almost half a million technology and engineering graduates a year each¹ and we must do something now. I pointed out that one of the principle driving factors for change in India and China is poverty.

Hunger is a huge motivator and we in the UK have not been hungry for some time.

Hugh Greenway is managing director of Reed Learning. He can be contacted via www.reedlearning.co.uk

I was reading in George Siemens' blog² the other day that "information is now validated at the point of consumption, not creation". So here are some free tips on how to consume more wisely and kick start your own mental health programme.

1. Find different sources of information to the one you are used to
 - a. Buy a paper with a different political viewpoint to yours or try a new news channel (I strongly recommend you try any of Al Jazeera, Fox News or CNBC as they should present a distinct difference to your current sources of info)
 - b. Set yourself up with a feedreader (Google Reader, Feedburner etc) and subscribe to some opinionated blogs or newscasts
 - c. Create a Delicious account
2. Learn how to search the internet properly
 - a. Type 'how to use Google' into Google
 - b. Attend one of our Reed Google Academy programmes
3. Question any facts you are given
 - a. A quick test is to type the statistic you have been given into a search engine, and see how many hits it gets and which trustworthy sites are included in the list
 - b. Snopes.com is a very good myth debunker
 - c. Set the fact in context. A percentage on its own is meaningless. If the rate of unemployment has doubled, ask "from what to what, of what?" Rising from 1 to 2 per cent of 27 million is not the same as rising from 15 to 30 per cent of 50 million. Likewise, a 'big number' is just a number without a comparative: 250,000 Chinese bankers is not the same as 250,000 Icelandic bankers
4. Learn a poem by heart. Rote learning is due for a comeback and memorising poems is very good way to exercise your ability to recall
5. Ask someone you don't like to explain something to you
6. Ask three people you trust what you should change about yourself and why
7. Accept that you are wrong and will continue to be wrong quite often. ■

Footnotes

1 There are a number of sources on the net claiming hugely varying numbers of technology and engineering graduates per year but a consistently quoted number (including on the BBC Science website) is about 400,000 technology grads per year from China and marginally less from India. Interestingly, if you compare this with the Institute of Employment Studies' 2003 report, which claims approx 20,000 technology grads per annum, and you accept that the population of the UK is about 1/20th of that of China, you find an alarming similarity. Lies, damned lies etc.

2 www.elearnspace.org/blog

