

Pigeonholing and Little Bits of Paper

Shôn Ellerton, April 24, 2020

Our unhealthy obsession with qualifying or discrediting others purely based on what degrees and diplomas they have rather than experience.



Have you ever been criticised for saying something because you don't have an official title, degree or some other bits of paper to 'prove' that you're an expert in that topic?

Have you ever been refused a job because you don't hold the necessary credentials for having it? I'll give you a personal example. I've been refused jobs in the IT industry because I hold a civil engineering instead of a computing degree, despite the many thousands and thousands of hours I've worked on IT projects. Many others have suffered the same plight in the working world.

Thankfully, regarding the second point above, a greater proportion of employers each successive year are slowly turning away from the stuffy practice of selecting job candidates based purely on what degree they hold. I hold the disclaimer that there are certain professions that do require formal qualifications, for example, airline pilots and surgeons, but for many others, it is not always necessary. Experience should be the main driving factor.

However, I have noticed a growing unhealthy trend towards dismissing advice, opinion and expertise from those who do not possess that 'important bit of paper'. This is especially evident in times of a crisis, whether it is from spread of bushfires and pandemics or from an economic crash.

To take a recent example, Australia recently aired its weekly [ABC Q+A program](#), the topic of which is to face serious questions about the battle to

contain the COVID-19 virus. One of the panellists, Gigi Foster, an economics professor, proved for some to be very unpopular with her views that the economic shutdown may prove to be far more damaging than the virus itself. Some said her views were heartless and cold, her interview having made an impression within the [international news](#) community. Some said her logic was valid and reasonable, especially from those who have fallen victim to being made jobless and having to queue up for dole money, or worse, being thrown out on to the street. But many discredited her views solely because she is an economist and not one from a medical profession.

Some of the best discussions and ideas come from those who may not have expert knowledge in their chosen field. There was an [interesting article](#) published in the Harvard Business Review by Riitta Katila, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University claiming that too many experts in a given field can compromise projects of innovation. Her research found that innovation thrives when expert users make up about 40% of an invention team. Although the article is medically-centric in its discussion, I believe it applies to any discipline or topic. Many innovations and ‘Eureka-type’ moments are spawned from those who are *not* experts in a particular field of study. Likewise, valuable advice can be given from someone who *is* an expert in their field based on practical experience but *not* having a degree or some other document to show for. Sadly, and surprisingly, there are many that never accept the notion that someone could be an expert without having that ‘bit of paper’. And this is plainly wrong.

Back in March 2020, I wrote a slightly controversial article titled [Secretly Yearning for an Outbreak to Happen](#) based on some of the media coverage at the time of the virus in which certain groups of people, predominantly young adults, were flouting the rules about social distancing. I probably should have re-titled it because I started receiving a gamut of negative comments from those who just read the headline and not the underlying material. One of the comments suggested that, not being a philosopher based on my LinkedIn profile, is that I have no right to write it. Moreover, the commenter inferred that I cited science fiction in the article which does not warrant any value philosophically. I *did*, in fact, cite *The Andromeda Strain*, a novel written by [Michael Crichton](#), who was educated in biological anthropology and started a medical degree and, then, decided he hated studying medicine and started writing instead. Aldous Huxley’s [Brave New World](#) is fiction. George Orwell’s

[1984](#) is fiction. Did any of the authors of these books have degrees in philosophy?

I do not need a bit of paper to show the world I'm a philosopher. I'm not even claiming to be a philosopher; however, do I not have a right to contribute to philosophy?

In my teenage years, I had four hobbies, each of which, couldn't possibly be further away from each other as if they were situated on the four points of the compass. The four hobbies were computer programming, reading philosophy, playing classical piano and mountaineering. Computer programming taught me logic. Reading philosophy taught me to think critically. Playing piano gave me great insight to music and the arts, and mountaineering was pure adventure coupled with physical exercise. I wasn't very good at doing my homework though, but let's not go there!

Do I have a computing degree? No.

Do I have a music degree? No.

Do I have a philosophy degree? No.

And if a mountaineering degree *did* exist, I probably wouldn't have one of those either!

Here's a little scenario to think about.

You're in a critical state lying on a hospital gurney. Just before you black out, you are given the choice of being treated by a recently trained medical doctor or an experienced nurse who's worked in the operating theatre for many years. Here's the twist. The nurse is given the same authority and powers as the doctor. Which one would you choose? I know which one *I* would choose!

Experience is incredibly valuable despite what bits of paper you're holding. I'm not suggesting that we *don't* have certifications, degrees and qualifications. All I'm saying is that we should not discredit those simply because they do not have them.

Flipping the discussion on its backside, it's interesting how arguments presented by those who *do* have all the bits of paper get rejected by so many on grounds of not following the accepted narrative of the day.

Just yesterday, I watched an [interesting interview](#) regarding Sweden's position of *not* instigating a lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic with [Prof Johan Giesecke](#), a retired Swedish physician who was, from 1995 to 2005, the state epidemiologist of Sweden and, from 2005 to 2014, the chief scientist at the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. At time of writing, we do not know if Sweden will be a success or not in reducing the effects of the pandemic; however, a vast majority of readers worldwide dismiss his views instantly on trifling accounts. One, that he is retired, and two, that he said he is advising the Swedish government 'for fun'.

To assert that someone who has retired does not hold the same credibility as one who has not yet retired is a *non sequitur* and totally irrelevant. For example, where I work, we often need to coax people out of retirement to fix our mainframe systems and COBOL code, but to then state we should be hiring young programmers who did crash courses in COBOL and IBM mainframes instead because they are not retired is plainly ridiculous.

As for the statement Giesecke makes about having fun in assisting the Swedish government, well, all I can say is that the Swedish (and Germans I might add if my late German grandfather is a typical example) can sometimes possess a dry sardonic sense of humour which might arouse the more twitchy of us, especially considering the enormity of pandemics.

In this case, Giesecke, *does* hold that 'bit of paper', but the over-arching narrative of the day, to lock down everyone in their homes, stop children going to schools, close all businesses and, essentially, stop the economy in its tracks to stop the spread of a virus which we do not know much about and which may never be eradicated, has, perhaps, trumped over logical and rational reasoning. I'm not suggesting that Giesecke is one hundred percent correct in his views; however, I'm more willing to accept his views based on his experience and logic rather than simply accept the common narrative.

Many of us also have this bizarre tendency to belittle or discredit those who may have those 'bits of paper' or experience within *multiple* disciplines which are wildly different. For example, take a medically trained doctor who then takes up a career of writing children's fantasy books which turn out to be successful and famous. By the way, you know that Roald Dahl (of children's books fame) was also a WWII fighter pilot, right? I guarantee that the instant that same person publishes a controversial medical article, a flood of derisory

comments will ensue from trolls exclaiming how could such an article be taken seriously by someone that writes children's fantasy books?

Pigeonholing and consigning people to boxes based on what bits of paper they're holding is, at best, short-sighted, uncompromising, limiting and not conducive to innovation and enlightenment for others.

As a final thought, try this next time you watch a panellist discussion on the topic of the day. Make a note of intentionally not wanting to know who the panellists are during the introductions. Of course, this may not be possible if you recognise them already but give it a go all the same. After the discussion, make your own assessment to the outcome of the discussion and then, later, find out who they were. You will be surprised how many of us quickly change our opinions when we find out what they do or what experience they have!