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We are all familiar with current newspaper headlines - Educational Standards falling - Illiteracy on the increase - Teaching skills declining. The list is endless. So what exactly is education? What is an educated person? Why is there so much public concern? After all, schools and colleges have only been in existence for a relatively short time in terms of the history of mankind, and it should be possible for an individual to exist without a formal (conforming?) education. This has been so in the past but maybe times have changed. Maybe an individual does now need to be taught how to survive in society.

There exists a preoccupation on the part of potential employers that only individuals with 'proof of education' can be suitable for the job on offer. It is deemed essential now to have at least four educational pass certificates, to be even considered for the most mundane of jobs. Anyone who does not reach this basic standard of conformity is rapidly becoming unemployable and debarred from earning a living wage - vitally important if he wishes to be accepted by modern society. The government is playing this game now. Young people are, or will be, financially penalised if they don't, or are unable to take up places on government 'training' schemes. Training for what? It appears that we may be heading towards an 'elitist' society, what a disaster that would be.

I see 'education' in a different way. I do not accept that the formal educational certificates are proof of ability. I do not subscribe to that dogma. I should say at this stage that I have been through an established educational process. I have achieved 'O' level passes, I have served an engineering apprenticeship, and I have a nationally recognised qualification. All this has enabled me to take on my present job - which I enjoy immensely. However I am not so smug as to say that nobody else could do the job as well as myself.

My feeling is that to be educated means to be able to communicate, communication being a two-way process. It is one thing to be able to express one's point of view, even impose it on other people; there are many well-known individuals whose names spring to mind as being representative of this kind of person; but to be able to express one's own point of view and yet to be willing to hear and possibly accept the opinions of others requires the very special qualities of tolerance and understanding.

To achieve the kind of education that brings tolerance and understanding would require a complete review of the existing system. Recalling my own studies at school, I remember the very narrow and restricted curriculum that existed. For example, in English Literature I was expected to study 'set' books and plays, and to remember them so that I could answer questions in the examination at the end of the term. At no stage was I asked what I wanted to read. The net result of this is that I wasted most of my early formative years avoiding great literary works like the plague. It certainly did nothing to broaden my outlook.

It was quite a revelation to discover 'Adult Education' when I left school. Now here was the opportunity I needed. I was free to pick and choose the subjects I wanted to study - to think about topics in the way that I wanted to, ask questions if I needed to and disagree if I felt like it. What freedom! For once in my life, I felt I was being educated and at the same time so well aware of all the things I didn't know. I developed a particular yearning to learn other peoples' attitudes, the way other civilisations deal with their social problems, and so on. Comparative studies of any kind seemed to be the ones to follow. With this came a humility, an acceptance that I didn't know everything, and I feel I am wiser as a result.

Great Britain is one of the few countries in the world where an individual is still allowed to follow his own nose with regard to education. This freedom could come to an end if we don't fight for it. The strength of organisations like the W.E.A. must be reinforced if we are not to become a nation of blind followers and bigots. We must become communicators.