

## Hugh Greenway wonders if technology can provide safe places for asking questions

**I always thought that, as I got older, the reward for those advancing years would be a reduction in uncertainty. I figured that there would be fewer questions and more answers. I hoped that I would find a balance.**

Just how wrong is it possible to be?!

I'm not suggesting that I have become a gibbering, neurotic mess in my middle age but I am increasingly aware of things I don't know. More questions occur to me each day and many of them contradict each other.

If I had been this aware of all these contradictions when I was a teenager, I would probably never have got out of bed. I discussed this with a friend the other week and we reflected on the moment that the penny dropped for each of us about adulthood. We shared stories of how, as young boys and then young men, there were certain people that we looked up to – whose confidence, *sang froid* and certainty we admired.

Then one day we noticed someone looking at us in the same way, searching for a key to unlock the paradox of life, and we realised that we had become grown-ups. Not because we had the answers, but because we had become comfortable with the unpredictability, the irrationality and the unfairness.

So far, so happy clappy. Just in case you are worried, I haven't joined a cult or renounced my worldly possessions and gone to live on a rock. I am still as stressed, pressurised, hypocritical and erratic as the next man. But I can live with it.

I have written before about the importance of learning being the question not the answer. I have also wittered on about the difficulty of getting people to risk embarrassment by asking questions.

I wonder if we can make questions less scary. How we can remove the stigma from ignorance. If fear of being wrong is a learned response, can we unlearn it and go back to the delightful innocence of the child asking: "Why is the sky blue?"<sup>1</sup>

I think that having more 'safe' places to ask questions might be the answer. Traditionally, when we didn't know something, we asked our parents or our teachers. Until the first person helpfully poured scorn on our ignorance and we discovered shame. From that point on, we each ran a little

calculation in our heads along the lines of A (how much do I want to know this particular piece of information?) – B (how likely is someone to laugh at me for not knowing this and how bad will I feel as a result?)

If lots of people laugh at you or make you feel bad, you are increasingly less likely to ask, and so on. Equally, someone who is quite happy asking questions because he doesn't think people will laugh, and doesn't mind people laughing that much anyway, is likely to ask more questions.

But if there are more places to ask questions where you aren't embarrassed and you get a positive response, might this break the cycle? We are no longer limited to our parents, siblings, teachers and our classmates. There is a whole universe of networks that we can belong to, many of them anonymously, where we can practice asking questions.

I have admitted before that I was 38 before it occurred to me to type 'how to use Google' into the Google search bar<sup>2</sup>. It's not as if Google was going to laugh at me. Only last week I Twittered<sup>3</sup>, as an experiment, asking whether anyone in my network knew how to share Delicious bookmarks with a comment and I got a reply from Delicious! At the same time, I speculated in my blog about how cool/dangerous it might be when we can have head-up displays (as imagined in the Schwarzenegger movie *Terminator*) that project information onto the world around us, only to be told that 'augmented reality' is already with us<sup>4</sup>.

So with more and more places where we can ask questions without being made to feel like the scrawny kid that nobody wants on their team at school, will more people ask questions?

Or does technology just provide more opportunities for embarrassment (eg the current trend for kids bullying by text message and on FaceBook)? When you think of how much it hurt as a child to have your 'friends' laugh at you, how much more disabling is the risk that the whole world might laugh at you?

Told you I was conflicted... ■

### References

1. In short, because the water atmosphere scatters light at the blue end of the visible spectrum. For a better answer [http://www.sciencemadesimple.com/sky\\_blue.html](http://www.sciencemadesimple.com/sky_blue.html)
2. If you haven't done this, please do it!
3. I know I've been cynical about Twitter before but I never thought to just ask it a question
4. See the comment on my blog post on "Data Swimming" which link to applications for the iPhone and the Google Android Phone <http://reedlearningblogspot.com/2009/10/data-swimming>



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