

An Introduction to

DEEP THINKING



Written and illustrated by
Deb J Hill

About the Author:

Dr Deb Hill works out of the Whanganui Learning Centre's Creative Hub. Her work is informed by her 30-plus-years of teaching Political Philosophy of Education in a number of tertiary teaching settings. This booklet is only a brief introduction to some of the ways in which our thinking can become captured by our background learning experiences.

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Author's introduction

There are few works that talk about "deep thinking". There are a lot that talk about "critical thinking". To me, the two go hand-in-hand. If people learn to think more deeply, then critical thinking is the outcome. That's why I decided to create this little booklet. If you read on, my own story explains why.

I'm a Political Philosopher of Education. I adopted this title because I was employed at my university in the 1990s to be a Philosopher of Education. Most of the staff I worked with thought that this title meant that I was interested in schools and what went on inside them. They put me in a box called "schooling philosopher".

That wasn't what I was interested in at all. In fact, what most interested me was why they thought the way they did; why did the word "education" have to mean "formal schooling"?

So you see, the whole way they "boxed" and "labelled" me was actually what interested me the most. What went on in people's minds to automatically translate the word "education" to "schooling" was what fascinated me the most.

After a while, I got so tired of having to explain to colleagues that I wasn't interested in schools per se that I decided to rename myself a "Political Philosopher". It drew people up as intended. They had to think more deeply about what I might be teaching and researching. I disrupted their normal stream of thought.

This introduction is meant to disrupt your journey of "learning" by suggesting that your journey started when you were born; that it is your "off the radar" learning that you need to reflect upon above all else. As I show here, it is the automatic assumptions we make—when we hear a word and associate it with what we think is meant—that is the most fertile ground for you to begin to hoe as a learner. Learning is not about content: it is about process.

As I say at the conclusion, the challenge of deep thinking is more than thinking well or badly. It is about activating your thoughts; of learning to think about and judge the nature of your thinking...

which, come to think of it, seems a pretty good definition of "education".

Deb J Hill
November 2020

WHAT THE HECK IS DEEP THINKING?

The purpose of this little booklet is to get you thinking about your own thinking. This is the way to get you “thinking again” about stuff you probably never think about!

Have you ever gasped for air?

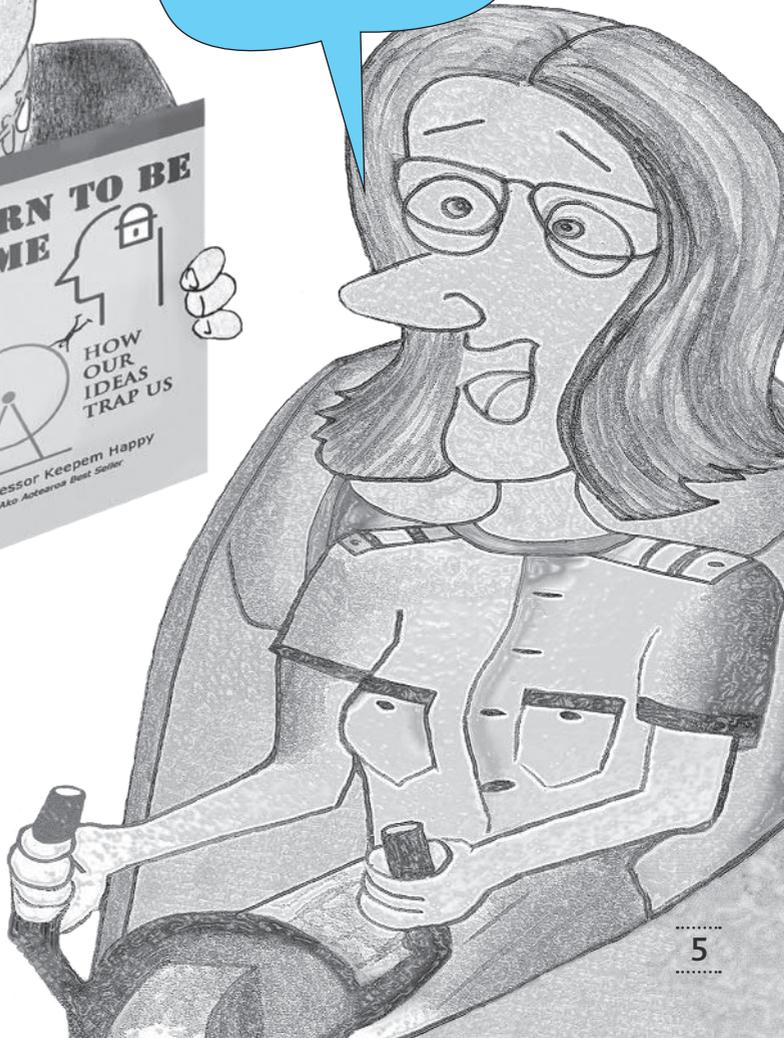
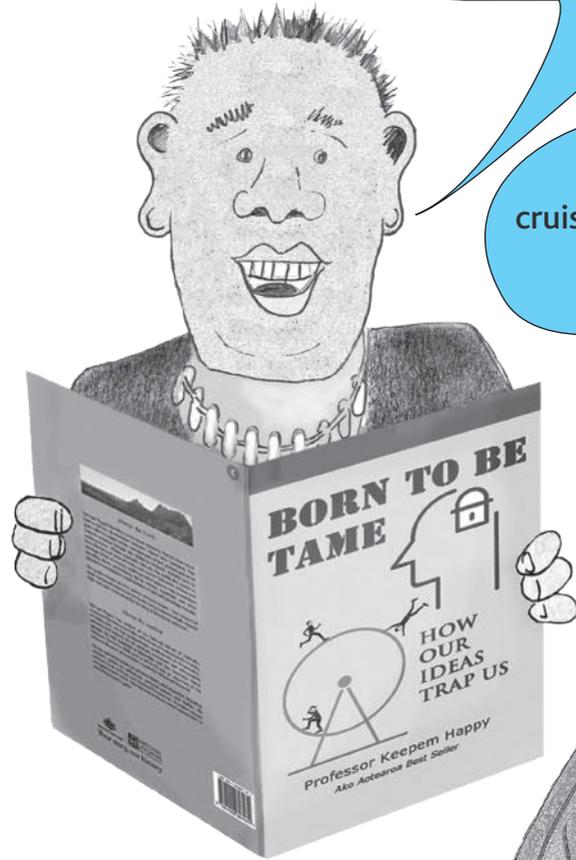
GASP!

It's only when we have trouble breathing that we realise how important the air around us is.



Thinking's the same. We get so used to things "the way they are". We don't even think about most of the stuff we do.

We can just cruise through life on auto-pilot.



Hey! But most people are pretty onto it.
How can you say they don't think?

I'm not saying they don't think. But humans spend a long time learning from others...



From the time we're born, we're soaking up the ideas, beliefs, assumptions and values of everyone around us. By the time we're teens and adults, we've learnt to think a lot like our family and friends... but we don't really notice it!

Yeah... we learn stuff without even knowing we're learning stuff!

It just becomes normal.



Think about your own upbringing. Think of the messages you might have absorbed from your family and friends and teachers...

...that you suited certain clothes.

...that you were pretty, or had a big nose, or were overweight.

...that you needed to work harder.

...that you'd make a great rugby, netball or hockey player.

These stories build up like layers of an onion. They shape how we see ourselves over time.

If we hear the same messages over and over again, we begin to believe that's who we are.



As we grow, we absorb lots of messages like these ones — as well as being taught up-front what's expected of us...



...within our family

...within our culture



...within our religion.

The ideas, beliefs and attitudes of those around us influence our tastes and choices too. We become used to certain things...

...like normal food



...yeah, like these sauces



...and we get used to wearing certain clothes.



In other words, we don't invent our world. We become used to the world we're born into...



Our thinking becomes set by the times so we actually become “trapped” by the normal way we think.

I can see where the word mindset comes from!

But we don't know we're trapped because these ways of thinking are just normal.

I'm quite happy not thinking too much.



Deep thinking starts by recognising how our minds have been shaped by our upbringing. It begins by thinking about our own history of thinking...

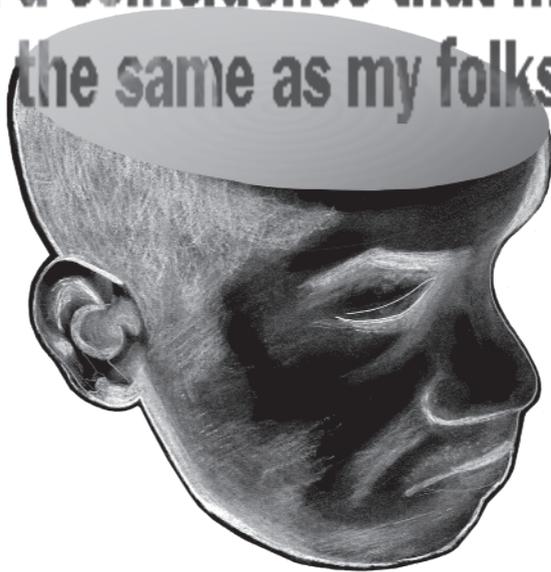
We need to ask...

How did I come to think like that?

What made me think that about myself?

Do I really believe that?

Is it just a coincidence that my likes
are the same as my folks?



WHAT HISTORY TEACHES US

Even though most of us have been brought up to believe that our thoughts and ideas are our own, most of us think within a box. If we start to think about the choices we've made in our own lives, it's surprising how we begin to see how they follow certain patterns based on what is "normal" in our society.

Someone once said that we come into the world as question marks but get turned into full stops.

I like that! Little kids are always asking 'Why?'. Drives you nuts but I guess kids are wired to learn that way.



Is it just a coincidence that what we treat as normal are just the values of our time? This is the real value of knowing our own history — and of recognising how our thinking has been shaped by the times in which we live.

**Good grief!
Imagine being a
woman teacher
back then! If you got
married, you had to stay
at home, have babies and look
after your husband!**

1872 Rules for Teachers

Teachers everyday will fill lamps and clean chimneys.

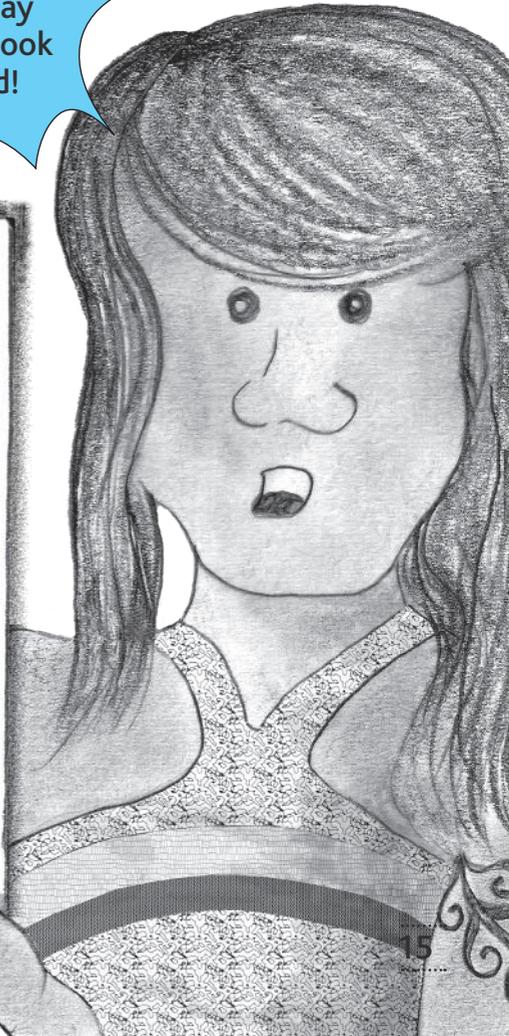
Women teachers who marry or engage in unseemly conduct will be dismissed.

Men teachers may take one evening each week for courting purposes and two if they attend church regularly.

After ten hours in school, teachers may spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books.

Every teacher shall lay aside from each pay a goodly sum for his declining years so he may not be a burden on society.

You may ride in a buggy with a man, if that man is your father or brother.





Plants played a huge role in the olden days. If you had anything wrong with you, they were used to help cure you.

History teaches us that certain ways of seeing the world shape our thinking so that we think we're being taught to "think" but our minds are really being shaped by the times and culture in which we live.



We've forgotten all this. We pay big companies to pop pills instead.

And our schooling is a big part of the problem. The purpose of schooling is to fit people into society and its existing values. It's about preparing kids to get a job and become useful citizens.

I have no idea what I want to do but I need to pass this test!



I want to set up my own business like my folks.



The focus isn't on recognising why and how you've come to think the way you do. It's about getting a qualification to enter the job market.

I want to be a builder like my old man.

I want to be a researcher and write books and teach.



People are trained to “follow” — to do what is normal rather than being encouraged to question the value of this form of so-called education.



Again, a lot has to do with history... Schools were all about discipline.



ROLES
ROUTINES
REGULATIONS



We got punished if we didn't learn the three 'Rs'.

Schools kept youth out of trouble. They taught morals and manners. They gave youth skills for work. Schools trained bodies and minds.

So if you think about it, schools don't teach people to think very deeply at all. They act as sorting machines, using testing and grading to "measure" how good their students are...

And because not all students come from the same background, treating them "the same" is really unfair...

Students are rewarded for the habit of answering questions instead of questioning answers.

English is the main language used and lots of us have a different mother-tongue.

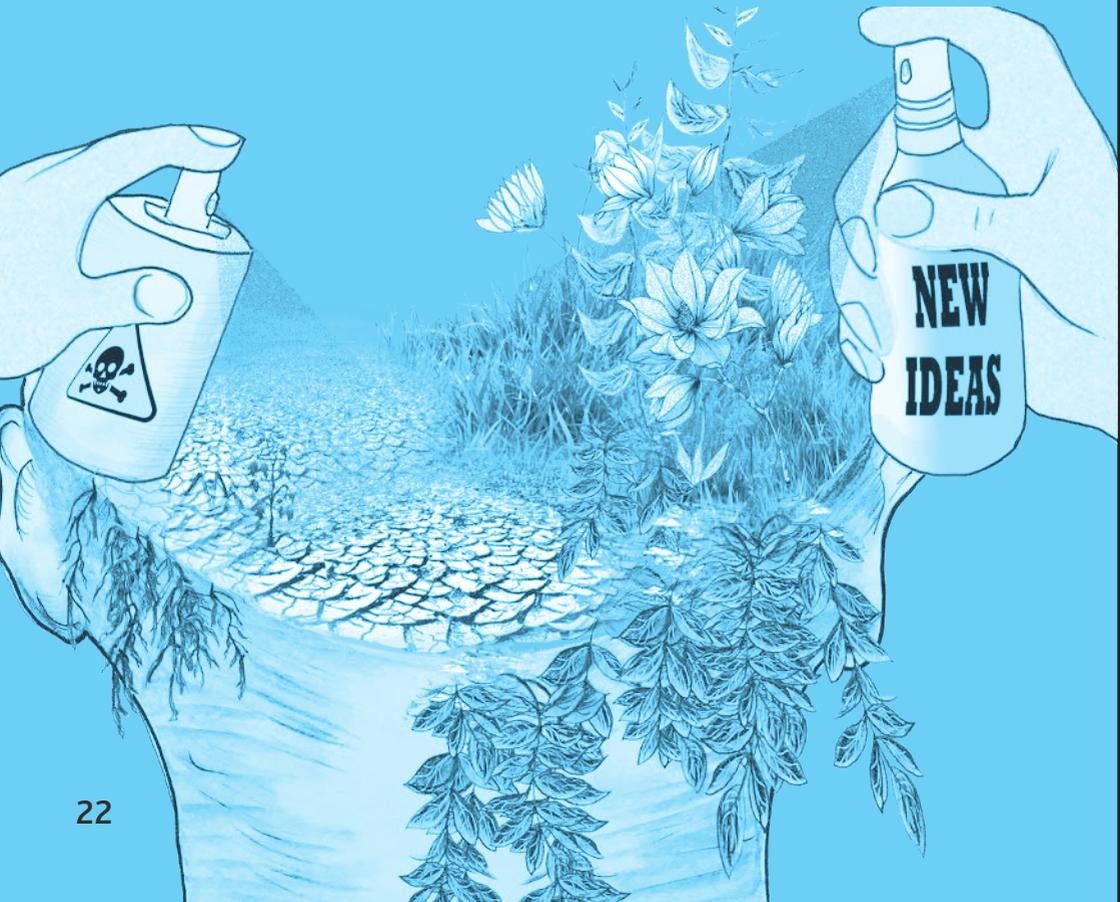
If I don't pass the tests, I'm seen as dumb!

Teachers teach to the test and we only learn what's going to be tested.



The first step towards deep thinking is that we recognise all these hidden messages: how we become limited in our thinking and then through the choices we make. We need to become actively conscious of this history of self and social conditioning.

A lot of our learning discourages other ways of seeing ourselves and the world beyond. It kills the growth of new ideas. It kills our ability to think outside the patterns of thinking we've become used to.



THINKING ABOUT OUR PATTERNS OF THINKING

We get taught a lot of quick ways of doing things that save us time and energy. These ways of thinking become normal in society. As was said at the start, they become like the air we breathe. The problem is, by relying on these old patterns of thinking, we stay thinking within the square. If we are aware of these traps, then we can escape the box.

I don't think within a box! What do you mean?

Well, we get taught to use shortcuts but they become so invisible after a while that we don't even know they're limiting our ideas.



These shortcuts stop us questioning.

We know stuff so we don't stop and question how we know. We just treat a lot of stuff we know as fact.

And one of the biggest mistakes we make is thinking things are set in concrete and can't be changed.



If we think things are permanent, we think they can't be changed. But most of what we think is solid or set in concrete actually isn't. Most of our ideas are socially constructed...

What does socially constructed mean?

It means that people have created ways of understanding

and organising the world.

We "buy into" these ideas and forget they are just shortcuts that humans have created to understand the world.



Eastern bloc

RACE

ASIAN

gender

MARKET

FIRST WORLD



ECONOMY

The problem with these patterns is they act to limit our own thinking. For example, the word “work” usually means “paid work”. So this short-cut often makes caregiving, housework or volunteer work unimportant and invisible.

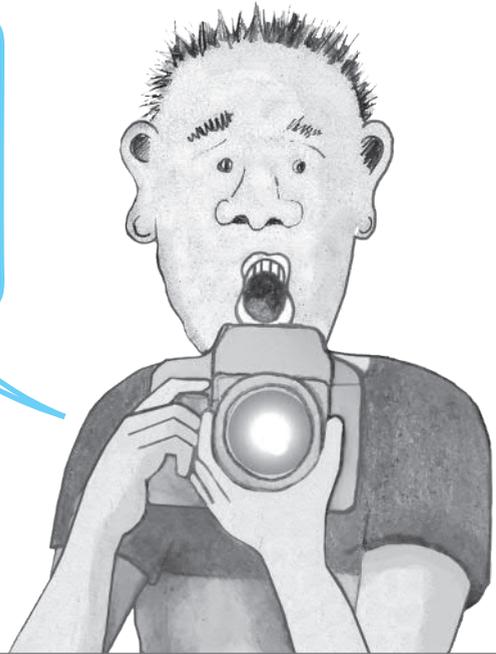
I'm just a housewife.
I don't work.

I'm
officially
“unemployed” at
the moment, but
I volunteer in my
community doing
all sorts!

And so am I, even
though I'm a student.
According to the
employment
data, it makes
it look like a lot
of us don't work!!



And remember that “data” is another shortcut. It’s a quick snapshot or measure of something
...on that day
...at that time.



Although data can be useful, people try to use data in all sorts of strange ways. They end up trying to compare apples with cats. More is lost from the story than gained. The more we try to simplify the world through data, the more invisible we make the deeper and richer details about human life.

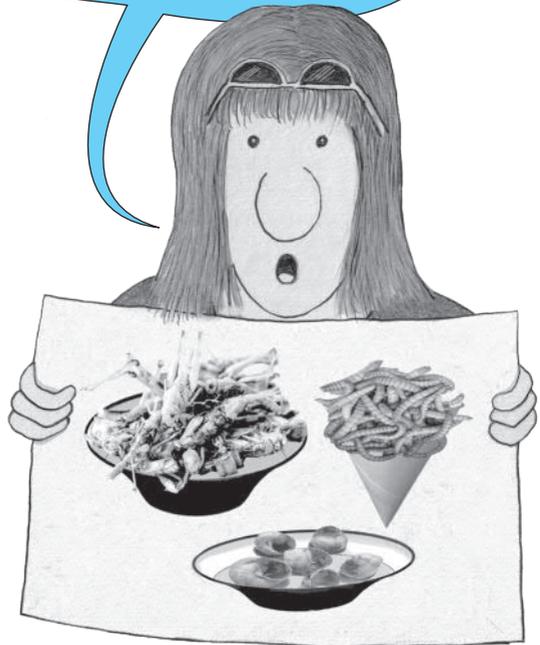


Words are just like containers; they hold an image, picture or story about whatever it is we want to describe.



Because of our differing backgrounds, the same word can be understood quite differently. This often depends on the breadth and depth of each person's experiences...

Weird food for one person may not be for another who has travelled.



If you understand that each word can be used as a label, which is another shortcut, then you know the trap. Labels pigeon-hole people and things by making it easy to group stuff...



But although labels can be useful, like data, if we don't know how they work, we just accept the limits they put on our thinking. Either/or thinking, works like that...

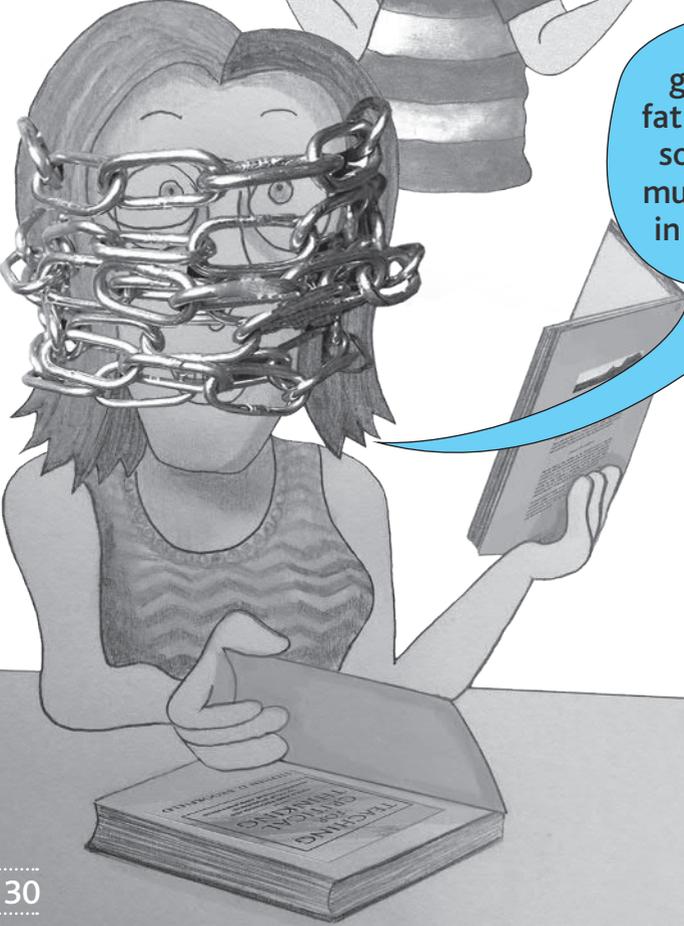


Yeah... people are biased. It's better to be a professional rather than an amateur. Or strong rather than weak.

So deep thinking involves understanding how the very words we use and our own "head-talk" traps us into accepting the way things already are around us. As we saw earlier, this might relate to how we see ourselves...



If you get told you're dumb all the time and a loser, chances are you'll start to believe it.



I kept getting told I was fat and had a big nose so I never went out much and read books in my room instead.

...or how we see others and the world around us...
and you've got to take history always into account.



Yeah...
we're slaves and that
was just normal in
older times.

I have
three jobs to try to pay for
food, petrol and rent. May as
well call me a wage-slave!



Asking questions about what you think and what you hear is a great start towards thinking both differently and deeper. Many people don't bother because nothing shakes them up to do so.

A lot of people are just surviving. They don't know there's any more to life than living day-by-day. And why should they?

They describe the world as it appears on the surface.

They don't think about things that don't make sense.

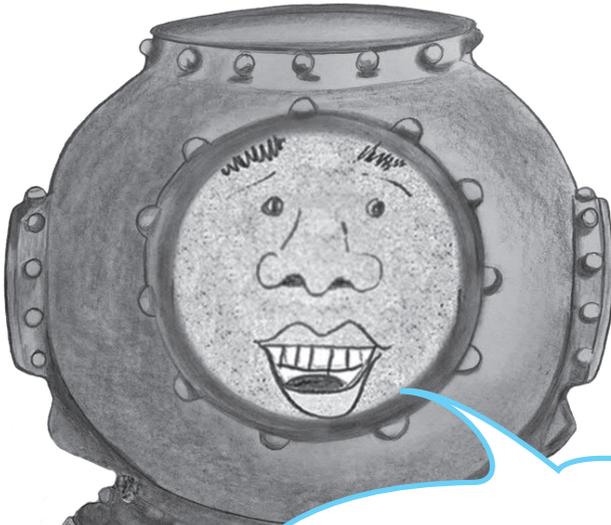
They don't know or want to know any other way of thinking about things.

And people who have done well in the system don't have a reason to change it.

Yeah... people like me have sailed through uni, got a good job and are really happy with life.

So just to be clear, deep thinking is more than normal thinking. Although you might be really good at normal thinking, it doesn't mean you can think deeply.

As this little booklet has tried to show, we have to understand the traps that lie in the "normal" and learn to side-step the patterns that might be limiting our own worldview.



It's more than thinking well or badly. It's learning to think differently. That is the challenge of deep thinking.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

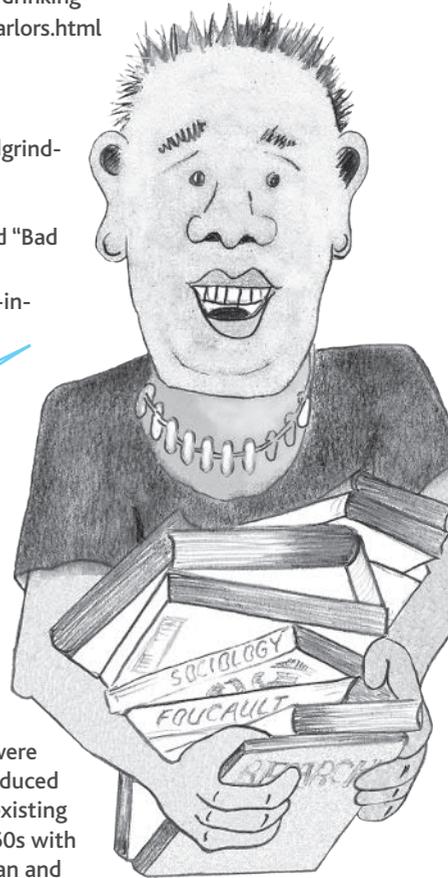
The following information and illustrations have been adapted and reproduced in this work:

- p.15 Adapted from "Rules for Teachers in 1872". Accessed from <http://www.openculture.com/2013/09/rules-for-teachers-in-1872-1915-no-drinking-smoking-or-trips-to-barber-shops-and-ice-cream-parlors.html>
- p.19 Right-hand corner illustration by Pat Touret, "The Victorian Schoolroom". Accessed from: <https://betterlivingthroughbeowulf.com/grandgrind-unleashed-in-english-classes/>
- p.19 Centre illustration adapted from the drawing titled "Bad kids wore a dunce cap". Accessed from <https://blogsancestry.com/cm/how-school-was-different-in-the-1800s/>

The works below are a sample of a huge number of works that have informed Deb's understanding of these issues.

Education and its confusion with schooling

Although theorists such as Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci were among the first to highlight the way education was being reduced to formal schooling, and how "knowledge" legitimated the existing power arrangements within a society, it wasn't until the 1960s with works by Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner that these ideas became popularised.



Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder & Herder.
Goodman, P. (1964). *Compulsory mis-education*. New York: Horizon Press.
Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. New York: Harper & Row.
Postman, N. & Weingartner, C. (1969). *Teaching as a subversive activity*. New York: Delta.

My colleague, Graham Oliver, has made a significant contribution to revealing the problems associated with the reduction of education to schooling. See,

Oliver, R. G. (1998). The ideological reduction of education. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 30(3), 299–302.

Oliver, R. G. (n.d.). "Education for living well for human flourishing," <https://www.rgrahamoliver.com/>

Education as politics

Education systems have always been set up to support the society and its economy. In this respect, they are political institutions. See,

Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education: Culture, power and liberation*. Westport, CT: Bergen & Garvey.

Gatto, J. T. (1992). *Dumbing us down. The hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.

Giroux, H. & McLaren, P. (1989). *Critical pedagogy, the state, and curriculum struggle*. New York: SUNY.

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Works focusing on bias and inequality

These works are particularly interesting:

Houkamau, C. & Blank, A. (2017). *Rewire: The little book about bias*. Auckland: Oranui Press.

Rashbrooke, M. (ed.) (2015). *Inequality: A New Zealand crisis*. Wellington: Bridget Williams Books.

Waring, M. (1988). *Counting for nothing. What men value and what women are worth*. New York: Harper & Row.

Critical thinking material

Here are two works for further reading:

Brookfield, S. (2011). *Teaching for critical thinking. Tools and techniques to help students question their assumptions*. Germany: Wiley.

Paul, R. & Elder, L. (2016). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools*. Foundation for Critical Thinking, www.criticalthinking.org



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