

What Does \223Educated\224 Mean?
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The newly elected president of Egypt is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, which should alarm us a bit. But we are being reassured that he has a Ph.D. in Engineering from an American university--USC.

Iran\222s president, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, also has an Iranian Ph.D. in Engineering. Syria\222s dictator has a degree in ophthalmology from England. We will find leaders from all over the developing world with such degrees. How \223educated\224 are they?

The UN\222s literacy figures for such countries apparently come from the host governments (as do population numbers). Who double-checks these numbers? Are we talking about literate adults---and do those adults include women? What sort of standards are we using when we say that a country has a large percentage of literates? What can they read and comprehend? Are we talking about the bare minimum of literacy, knowing how to read and write one\222s name?

Although I am attacking the dubious numbers that we get from the developing world, there are problems with our own standards of literacy as well. What do we expect of our public education systems? Our own country, despite our literate heritage, is graduating thousands of young people from high schools and universities who have no common intellectual heritage. We run the risk of becoming a Tower of Babel, not sharing the basic core of who and what we are. But we can correct this if we wish; other cultures can\222t and won\222t.

In Renaissance Europe, the period accompanied by the greatest expansion of literacy since Rome, there were standards held in common. The educated elites (university graduates) were few in number, but all had been educated to the same standard, which permitted them all to communicate, no matter where in Europe they lived. They were expected to have fluency in Latin and Greek (and soon after, Hebrew), the languages that formed the basis of Western Civilization. They were all expected to understand the sciences of their day, and the best educated among them (often the kings themselves) could read and converse in French, English, Spanish, and Italian. The Scientific Revolution was born and transmitted in a flash throughout educated Europe.

With the advent of the printing press came the largest expansion of literacy yet, including (at least in England) village schools for every male child anywhere in the country, the brightest of whom would continue their educations at the cost of the crown. These young men were also expected to have a grasp of Latin and Greek, the history of antiquity and Christian history, and knowledge of the sciences and mathematics of their day.

The method of learning in the Western world is dependent upon thinking, ability to debate and question, and using the Socratic method (asking \223how do you know that?\224)

This permitted even religious orthodoxy to be questioned (Catholicism was then openly challenged in those places with no Inquisition) and Protestantism was born, bringing about changes seen nowhere else in any of the other great civilizations (China, India, Islamic).

It should raise a red flag when a person from a different civilization goes to school and \223gets educated\224 even in a Western university. Many get engineering degrees and many others medical degrees. A notorious fact in the Middle East is that many medically trained doctors never practice, preferring the paths of politics and often religious radicalism. The practical sciences, as wonderful as they are, do not require the rigor of critical thinking that historians and the most advanced sciences face.

Even without reliable literacy figures from such a country as Egypt, we know that a vast majority of women cannot read (although they voted in the election). Most likely a vast majority of men are either illiterate or just barely literate. We do know that in surveys taken around the world about reading habits, Americans read (on the average) 12 books a year while Egyptians, who were once the intellectual hub of the Arab world, read an average of one paragraph a year.

And what does that paragraph tell them?

674 words

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