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Editor's Notebook

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How I love accurate measurements, and hate crummy ones. For example I own several micrometers, two modern ones that read out measurements of length digitally and one that I got from my dad years ago that must be twirled and fussed with to yield its result. When they agree that a plank of maple is three eighths of an inch thick, I know with smug satisfaction that it will fit snugly into a slot cut seven sixteenths of an inch wide. Using these measures I’m perfectly happy to spread the glue for assembly without “dry-fitting” the joint first.

This is great for woodworking, but relatively little of what we need to measure is amenable to such purely quantitative evaluation. For example, what if you wanted to evaluate how much a person has accomplished in his or her career? I use this example because I’ve just been reminded of the extraordinary productivity of the great scientist and writer Isaac Asimov. A few years before he died in 1992, Asimov was photographed sitting in a very large easy chair constructed of books he had written. (Over his career he was the author, co-author or editor of at least 500 books, including some of the most influential and widely read science fiction ever written.) I am certain that Asimov would not consider the raw count, or even the fanciful furniture made of his books, to be a reasonable measure of his life’s work. I would certainly not want my career to be measured by such a metric, especially considering the unflattering image it produces.

For a more immediate and consequential example of this problem in measurement, consider an issue that was prominent in the *Sunday Boston Globe* on April 17 of 2011. On page one, the lead story reported our continuing march toward the evaluation of school teachers on the basis of the MCAS scores of their students. The story reported that “The state’s education commissioner proposed a set of regulations yesterday that would...reward teachers and administrators whose students show more than a year’s worth of growth in proficiency under the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System.” For years now we have been hearing about the fact that our “schools are failing” and that we must do something about it. That “something” has led to the measurement of student performance by a series of what its authors hope are objective measures of what these students know about a range of subjects at any given time. A great deal of effort has been expended getting these tests right, and now they have gained such traction in the minds of the public and the politicians who implement policy that teacher jobs and compensation rates may be largely dependent on these scores.

However, in the same edition of the *Globe*, there was a story about a conference of secondary and college educators organized by CONNECT, the South- eastern Massachusetts Public Higher Education Partnership. What emerged from this conference was the warning that students who do well on MCAS are frequently unprepared to do well in college, and that they often require remedial coursework to succeed there. The problem is that MCAS does not measure the ability of students to read, think and write critically about a range of topics. In the words of one of the conference organizers, these students are “qualified, but not ready for college.”

Unfortunately, when we cannot reliably measure what we want to measure, we often measure what we can and call it a day. It is particularly difficult for me, after a long career of relying on quantitative measures of human behavior, to accept that those human qualities that are most worth measuring are least amenable to quantitative measures. This includes learning and teaching. We can evaluate complex and subtle human qualities. The problem is that we cannot do so in the way that we measure the thickness of a plank of wood. We need to supplement our quantitative measures, as carefully as we may construct them, with qualitative insights. While it is important that a student retain a large amount of information about a range of topics, it is even more important that the student be able to use those facts in a cogent argument about some issue. We need our citizens to be able to reason and communicate. As any teacher of composition will tell you, these abilities cannot be evaluated by objective measures. Writing must be read and judged using the skills and knowledge of the evaluator, so we must trust that teachers can evaluate the quality of student work. How can we do this? My personal plan is that we finally start paying very high salaries to attract teachers to enter the profession, and then let the marketplace of competition fill our classrooms with the most talented people. Just as this approach has worked in the fields of law and medicine, you’ll get what you pay for.