



Editorial

The Gift that Keeps on Giving—But for How Long?

Robert J. Sternberg

Department of Human Development, Cornell University, B44 MVR, 116 Reservoir Ave., Ithaca, NY 14853, USA; robert.sternberg@cornell.edu; Tel.: +1-(607)-255-1452; Fax: +1-(607)-255-9856

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Some gifts keep on giving. Being identified as intelligent or even as “gifted” through IQ or related scholastic test scores (SAT, ACT, A-Levels, *etc.*) is one of them. When children are identified as generally intelligent or gifted, teachers are likely to treat them in a special way—to expect more of them. Through self-fulfilling prophecies, if nothing else, higher expectations tend to lead to higher achievement, which tends to lead to more high expectations, and so on down the line. Thus, being identified as generally intelligent starts children on a positive track, and unless the children disappoint their elders, they are likely to stay on that track throughout their schooling, which in turn will give them access to better universities, graduate and professional schools, and likely jobs. However, when intelligence is measured in ways that assess children’s ability to give elders what they want (and, after all, that is what intelligence tests largely test), the children are not all so likely to disappoint their elders. Not only general intelligence, but intelligence tests have seemed to be a gift that keeps on giving, selecting from one generation to the next the people who later will be chosen to be the leaders of our societies.

The main criteria used for identification of children as generally intelligent or intellectually gifted typically are IQ (or a related measure) and school performance. Children who do better on these measures are more likely to be identified and then instructed in ways that suit their higher levels of academic abilities. Moreover, the gift keeps on giving through elementary school, secondary school, and to some extent through university education. It even keeps on giving throughout one’s life.

The term, “the gift that keeps on giving,” apparently originated, at least in the United States, in the mid-1920s as a slogan advertising the newly invented phonograph. The phonograph was a remarkably successful invention, and one can see why the slogan would have been applied—once you have one, you can keep on listening to your favorite records. So the slogan, unlike most advertising slogans, was truly apropos.

At the same time, aside from in museums, how many phonographs have you seen lately? Like most inventions, the phonograph was useful for a period of time, and then gave way to new technologies. It was the gift that kept on giving, until it didn’t.

With school children, too, the importance of IQ never entirely disappears (people still like to listen to music, even though phonographs are not much to be found), but for them to be successful as they move through their life, they need to develop others skills, just as “listening to music” began to give way to newer technologies. They need to find with themselves a broader range of skills that make a difference to everyday adult life. This range includes general intelligence in the traditional sense but also includes broader skills, such as

The authors of the articles in the symposium, “Challenges of Intelligence Testing,” have tried to capture the broader range of skills that matter, in addition to general intelligence: reading [1], creativity [2,3], emotional or “hot” intelligence [4], and practical or contextual intelligence [5]. In my work, I have emphasized “successful intelligence,” involving traditional general intelligence (what I call “analytical intelligence”), but also creative and practical intelligence as well as wisdom-based skills [6,7].

Why have these investigators even bothered to study these other personal attributes? Because the gift that keeps on giving, like the phonograph, gives less and less as time goes on. To succeed in life requires progressively more of other skills. For example, a generally intelligent child who is weak in social skills is labeled as, well, a generally intelligent child who is weak in social skills. A generally intelligent adult who is weak in social skills is labeled as “not hired”, at least for the large majority of jobs. Even in academia, where social skills are perhaps at less of a premium than anywhere else, a job candidate who cannot successfully present a compelling talk and interact successfully with faculty administrators, faculty members, and students has difficulty in getting hired. Moreover, in most occupations—law, medicine, business—social skills are a premium. Who wants to go to a lawyer who cannot argue her case in court—or a doctor who cannot communicate with her as a patient—or a shop where the shopkeeper is rude? Similarly, although creativity may not be at a premium throughout most of schooling—in many cases, it may be actively discouraged—one scarcely can succeed as a scientist, or even as a lawyer, doctor, or business person, without the creativity to deal with new kinds of problems. Businesses, for example, that cannot creatively innovate have a common fate—they fail.

Some time ago, I gave a talk at a conference on high school achievement held in a large city. After giving the talk, I was interviewed by a group of adolescents identified as being extremely high in IQ and school achievement. The youths were introduced in a way that made them sound like super-geniuses. Their scholastic accomplishments were breathtaking. In contrast, I was astonished by the triviality of their questions and the students’ inability to articulate deeper questions based on the content of my talk. It was clear they were unprepared. I am sure that these students are as academically stellar as they were supposed to be. But in terms of creative skills (in generating interesting questions on big topics) and practical skills (in handling themselves as interviewers, they performed worse than I would have expected of an average student. Academically/analytically bright students can be notably lacking in creative and practical skills because they have been so highly rewarded for analytical/academic skills that they had no incentive to develop creative and practical ones. The problem is not just with the children: It is with an educational system run by adults who develop children to do little more than solve problems that they, the adults give them, in a way that makes the adults happy. These children will go through life feeling super-gifted, wondering why the world doesn’t just tell them what to do so they can do it exactly the way the world expects them to.

There is nothing new about viewing intelligence more broadly than as just general intelligence. Thorndike had the idea almost a century ago [8] when he introduced the idea of social intelligence. So a reasonable question to ask is why, even today, the standardized testing industry still does—in its SAT, ACT, GRE, LSAT, GMAT, MCAT, and other similar tests—what it did a century ago, emphasizing general intelligence (analytical abilities) far more than other kinds of abilities. Why is it that calls to broaden our horizons (e.g., Gardner [9]; Sternberg [10]) go unheeded?

I suspect there are lots of reasons:

- **Entrenchment.** The current system has been around a long time and people are reluctant to give it up and try something new.
- **Fear.** People are afraid to rock the boat. Better the devil they know than one that has yet to make its appearance.
- **Financial Gain.** There are a lot of people and organizations—testing companies, test prep centers, universities (who get the testing for free), and others—that gain financially from the current system.
- **Superstition.** When a system is around for a long time, people tend to believe in it, whether it works well or not.
- **Similarity.** The people running the show who decide on what tests to use often are people who did well on the tests themselves—otherwise they would not occupy their present positions—and so they look for other people like themselves.
- **Lack of courage.** Few academic administrators have the courage to be the first to try something new that might or might not succeed as they hope.

- **Lack of creativity.** People who get into positions of influence often are not selected for their creativity or their innovation but rather for their ability to keep doing what has been done before.
- **Vested interest.** Many parties have a vested interest in the current system, including professors who want students who are easy to teach.
- **Quantitative pseudo-precision.** Test scores sound precise, even if their precision is not with regard to the criteria they are supposed to predict.
- **Laziness.** People just don't want to bother to try something new so find reasons to keep doing the same old.

Some of these attributes may seem to speak poorly for decision-makers, but that is a matter of perspective. Administrators are rarely rewarded for showing high degrees of courage or creativity or for fighting against vested interest. For those who just want to do their job and keep that job, the easiest thing often is to keep doing what has been done before. Moreover, testing companies have little incentive much to change what they are doing if people keep buying the same old products they have offered for years. They make changes, but the changes are cosmetic and the tests keep measuring the same psychological attributes rather than different ones.

There is another issue. The new tests simply have not been validated in a way that renders them ready for use. Until organizations with high levels of resources are willing to invest in new kinds of measures, not much is likely to happen. Most of these organizations have modest research programs looking into new kinds of measures but then continue to generate their substantial income on the ideas of the early 20th century. As long as they make money doing so, they have little incentive to change. That is, one cannot hold the testing companies uniquely responsible for the current situation: The problem is in a system that is entrenched and for which the incentives for change have been insufficient, especially since those today in positions of power are largely those who profited from the current system.

In my own experience (see Sternberg [11,12]), it has been extremely difficult to get educational systems to change. When I was an administrator—as a dean and a provost—I was able to push through some changes, but as a professor, I've had little success. Others perhaps have done better. My personal goal in my career was to change the ways teaching and assessment both are done. I have not succeeded. However, all is not lost.

I have had many students, who in turn will have students, as will the other authors in this symposium. Moreover, their students will have students. Perhaps someday society will try truly more innovative forms of assessment. There is still plenty of time left, unless our continued uncreative, impractical, and unwise responses to global warming, terrorism, and other impending catastrophes get the better of all of us! Then we will see just how far general intelligence and the intelligence tests that measure it got us as a civilization. Without wisdom, intelligence is unable to solve the problems of our societies and of the world [13]. It is possible to be very generally intelligent, and at the same time, spectacularly foolish [14].

I am writing this article at the time of the primaries for the 2016 presidential election. Can anyone believe that our schools and colleges in the United States are teaching voters—or candidates—to be wise? A number of the primary candidates went to Ivy League universities—Ben Carson (Yale University), Hillary Clinton (Yale University), Ted Cruz (Princeton University, Harvard University), Carly Fiorina (Stanford University), Donald Trump (University of Pennsylvania). Certainly they have high IQs. Would any of them rate as high as a 2 on a 1 (low)–10 (high) wisdom scale? This choice is what our best universities produce? Donald Trump is winning primary after primary. How do our voters rate on a wisdom scale? IQs rose 30 points during the 20th century [15]. What, exactly, have the IQ points bought our society or our world? If the world today is what 30 IQ points bought, how much is IQ really worth?

In the future, we may find that we have the gift that keeps on giving—general intelligence and its associated intelligence tests—but we may no longer like very much what it gives us, if we are

around to like or dislike it. After a certain expiration date, gifts generally cannot be returned, and as a civilization, we may be reaching that expiration date.

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