

JUDGMENTAL ATTITUDES ON INTELLIGENCE

BOB ZASLAVSKY

Whenever someone tells me that I am intelligent, I am perplexed. I admit that by contemporary American standards, I am well educated. However, I do not know whether I am intelligent or not. Indeed, I do not know whether anyone is intelligent or not. Even more, I do not believe that anyone knows what intelligence, in the sense of inborn or native intelligence, is.

It always troubled me when one of my teaching colleagues would say that a given student was intelligent. It troubled me because their attribution of intelligence seemed without foundation. If he or she had said simply that a given student was a good student, that would have made sense to me.

The attribution of native intelligence to some students and the withholding of it from others seemed prejudicial and counterproductive.

Someone might object to my skepticism regarding our knowledge of, or our ability to identify, native intelligence by pointing to our use of intelligence tests, say, the IQ test or the SAT. Do not these tests measure intelligence?

I would reply that they do, and they do not. They do not, I would claim, measure native intelligence. Rather, they measure what I would call achieved intelligence. What the precise relationship is between achieved intelligence and some hypothetical native intelligence is anyone's guess.

The difficulty is compounded by our inability to extricate any native capability from its operation under the powerful influence of socialization.

Too much of what we regard as natural or innate is actually a product of socialization. After all, the process of socialization begins at birth—if not in utero—and does its work in subtle and unconscious ways no less than in blunt and overt ways. This is manifest, for example, in attitudes toward presumed gender differences, attitudes that persist despite avowed commitments to eradicate them. Men who would consider themselves gender egalitarians still largely tend to see themselves as primary earners and to expect their spouses to assume the lioness's share of cooking, housekeeping, and child-rearing. Moreover, women who would consider themselves liberated feminists still unthinkingly use sexist language and make sexist assumptions about the differently appropriate toys for their male and female children.

This is no less true of intelligence. There also we take conditioned gender responses or socio-economically generated characteristics as natural and constitutive.

When all is said and done, intelligence is a mystery.

Am I denying that there are individual differences of intelligence among humans? I am not: to deny that would be foolish. However, I would claim (1) that the range of native intelligence differences is narrower than the range of differences is for a physical characteristic, and (2) that we cannot know with certainty where any given individual human falls on the native intelligence scale.

This would imply that the only sound educational assumption is that all students are at the upper end of the scale. This in turn would mean that every educator must assume that every student is capable of achieving, not brilliance, but unadjusted academic competence. This was the assumption of all educators in this country before the First World War, of some educators between the First World War and the Viet Nam War (a some that grew smaller with each passing decade), and of virtually no educators since the Viet Nam War.

We would do well to return to that pre-First World War mind-set, a mind-set that Leo Strauss, in his essay "Liberal Education and Responsibility," beautifully and wisely articulated thus:

Once...a student asked me whether I could not give him a general rule regarding teaching. I replied: "Always assume that there is one silent student in your class who is by far superior to you in head and in heart."

Nowadays, we have fallen far from that ideal. Instead, we codify the ways in which students are inferior or incapable without stigmatizing them for that inferiority or incapacity. This has had the impact of excusing teachers from the need to be academically responsible and of allowing students to feel good about themselves even if their academic achievement is substandard.

When this kind of reasoning guides educational policy, the result is that we do not expect the most from all students because we prejudge that only some students are capable of achieving the most, and we assume that we can know which students these are.

For the non-capable others, we adjust—which means, in practical terms, dumb-down—our expectations. What we have failed to realize is that the dumbing-down of expectations is like a contagious disease that infects the very air that our students breathe.

When we dumb-down expectations for any student, ultimately we dumb-down expectations for all students.

Only if we unwaveringly accept that all students are equally capable of achieving the most will more of them rise to the top than our education professionals would believe.

*Bob Zaslavsky is a retired teacher of our much-neglected humanities.
He may be contacted through his Web site www.doczonline.com.*