

A LINE ON LIFE

12/24/95

"Book Smarts" vs. "Street Smarts" *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

Our IQ tests are adequate predictors of how well a person will do in school, but they are less effective in predicting how well a person will do in the "*real world*." IQ tests can account for only 4% of the variance in real-life job performance. Why is there such a difference?

The difference between academic intelligence ("*book smarts*") and practical intelligence ("*street smarts*") was first defined in terms of the tasks involved (Neisser, 1976). **Academic intelligence** is measured by IQ and most classroom testing. Typically the tasks in these tests have certain characteristics; they:

- are designed by other people,
- have all the information needed to complete the task,
- are usually well defined,
- typically have only one correct answer,
- usually have only one way to get the correct solution,
- are outside the person's typical experiences, and
- often are not interesting to the person being tested.

These characteristics are not typical at all for daily tasks that face us. In contrast, problems that require **practical intelligence** ("common sense"):

- are poorly defined,
- lack information needed to solve them,
- lack a method or formula for solution,
- have many possible "*correct*" answers, each with its own positive and negative qualities,
- have several ways for determining a solution,
- are related to our daily life experiences, and because of this, are personally interesting to us.

Practical intelligence relies much more on experience – "*learning the ropes*" or "*getting your feet wet*." These real-life problems are better measured by "*What if?*" tasks.

"If you were traveling in a car and got stranded out on an interstate highway during a blizzard, what would you do?"

"Assume you lived in an apartment that didn't have any windows on the same side as the front door.... At 2:00 a.m., you hear a loud knock on the door and someone yelled, 'Open up. It's the police.' What would you do?"

Another view defines **formal academic knowledge** more as facts ("*knowing that*"), while daily problems are tackled by using **tacit knowledge** which emphasizes procedures ("*knowing how*"). Tacit knowledge is more action-oriented – you need to "*do something*." Usually we don't get tacit knowledge from others, because it is very hard to pin-point procedures. Usually "*rules of thumb*" are developed that guide the individual. The knowledge is linked to a specific situation or group of situations. With the first problem above, being familiar with that area of the highway could suggest solutions – "*There is an all-night diner a half-mile down the road.*"

Some help in developing tacit knowledge can be obtained from other people or the media. Others can help us to distinguish more important from less important information, to combine our knowledge in useful ways, and to remember information that can be useful in solving the problems.

Our tacit knowledge is more likely to be obtained from our personal experiences. This is why people who are very experienced in a particular area are viewed as "*experts*." This can relate to surgeons, business managers, shoppers and even people on welfare. As experience is acquired, they get better in meeting their goals in their area. Often responses become so automatic, it is hard to communicate to others why a particular option should be chosen. Although academic information is helpful, it is no substitute for "*hands-on*" experience.

The more skill you have, the less luck you need.

Lastly, tacit knowledge helps us to obtain goals that are *important* to us. In contrast to school subjects that may not relate directly to our lives, tacit knowledge has an immediate practical use. It helps us to gain the goals we want. In the movies, an inept hero often achieves success with "*blind luck*." However, the more skill you have developed in an area, the less you will need to rely on luck.

There is also evidence that "*the ability to solve strictly academic problems declines from early to late adulthood*." In contrast, "*the ability to solve problems of a practical nature is maintained or even increased through late adulthood*." In other words, older people may be slower in some specific tasks, like typing speed. However, with their storehouse of experience, this may have no noticeable effect on their speed and accuracy in doing the total job. In fact, these skills can be maintained to the age of 70 and beyond. (What does this suggest about compulsory retirement?)

Another point relates to raising children. Some parents severely restrict their children's activities, because they fear that their children might be hurt. However, these "*hands on*" life experiences are important in developing knowledge that will help their children in the future. If parents deal with their fears, they can be more open to opportunities for their children to develop "*common sense*" in various areas of life. However, it is a balancing act that parents can perform more effectively – after they gain "*hands on*" experiences as parents.

* Adapted from Sternberg, Wagner, Williams and Horvath's "Testing Common Sense," *American Psychologist*, November, 1995, pages 912-926.