



# Teaching intelligence: Why, why it is hard and perhaps how to do it

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## ABSTRACT

In spite of the documented importance of intelligence, surprisingly few colleges and universities offer courses on the topic. Three reasons are given; lack of personal experience with the range of variation of intelligence in the society (cognitive segregation), association of intelligence with elitism, and a belief that the study of intelligence is associated with racism. The most important goal of a course on intelligence is to provide evidence of the importance of the trait in society, thus combating a lack of knowledge due to cognitive segregation. The course should examine biological and social causes of intelligence. Student participation is encouraged rather than total reliance on lectures. This can be done by forming virtual discussion groups. Examples are given of topics that could be discussed by these groups. Finally, it is argued that discussions of racial, ethnic, and international differences in intelligence should be postponed to a second course or seminar, after students have acquired a reasonably sophisticated understanding of the causes and effects of intelligence. The reason for doing this is that while the study of group differences is important, superficial discussions of these issues can generate heat while producing remarkably little light.

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## 1. Introductory remarks

### 1.1. The background of the discussion

This article, as with the other articles in this special issue, discusses the teaching of a course on intelligence. Such a discussion is more akin to an editorial than to a discussion of scientific evidence. Therefore, I shall adopt the style of writing appropriate to an Op-Ed section of a newspaper rather than the more dispassionate style of the typical scientific paper. The argument here is based on my personal opinions and beliefs, with no claim to scientific objectivity. That is the reason for frequent use of the pronouns “I” and “you.”

My focus will be on undergraduate courses, although on occasion I will comment on graduate courses and seminars. I will first present reasons that I think led to the unfortunate demise of courses on intelligence. I then make some general

comments on course goals and the manner of teaching, and finally consider specific topics.

My views on the teaching of intelligence have developed from my experience teaching this and related topics at the University of Washington, a large, research oriented urban university, from roughly 1970 until 2006. None of my courses ever conformed exactly to the recommendations to be made. These recommendations are based on “what worked” during my teaching career.

### 1.2. The disappearance of courses on intelligence

Should there be undergraduate and graduate courses on intelligence? The question may seem strange to anyone with knowledge of the literature. Across the population, measures of individual differences in cognitive capabilities, intelligence for short, are the most accurate predictors that we have of success in academic achievement, industrial and professional competence, and military performance. There are well established models of the multidimensional nature of psychometric measurements of

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intelligence, including the fact that a single large factor, general intelligence (*g*) often dominates the multidimensional space.

Going further, we certainly do not know everything about the source of intelligence, but we do know a lot. There are substantial, well documented findings about genetic contributions, the physiological basis for individual differences in cognition and increasingly, the complex interplay between environmental causes and effects.

There is also a great deal of information about group differences, both internationally and across demographic groups within national populations. Cause and effect are harder to unravel at the population level than at the individual level, but the data on correlations are clear. Indeed, we have a great deal of information about the relation of intelligence to that one demographic variable that influences us all; aging. Such information is of a great deal of social importance to the aging industrial societies, even if the reason for interest in the topic may evade many undergraduates.

Given what is known, one might expect that courses on intelligence would be taught widely. They are not, although at one time they were. Professors who themselves do research in the field offer courses in their specialty. A good many of these seem to be “graduate only.” But what happens when we move outside of this fairly narrow group of scholars? In preparing this article I looked at the course list in six of the most prestigious universities in the United States; Stanford (as of 2013, the most selective university in the country in terms of the ratio of admissions to applicants) Harvard, Yale, the universities of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles, and the University of Michigan. None of these universities listed a course on intelligence in their undergraduate Psychology curriculum (Stanford did include a reference to intelligence in a course on expertise and its development).

The scarcity of courses in intelligence, both in universities in general, and in the elite universities in particular, is a serious issue. By and large, the social leaders of tomorrow are in the college and university classes of today. This is strikingly true at the highest levels of leadership. As of 2013, every member of the US Supreme Court and ten of the twenty presidents holding office since 1900 had earned at least one degree from either Harvard, Stanford, or Yale.<sup>1</sup> The association of education with influence spirals downward. As of 2010, 74% of the members of American state legislatures held at least a bachelor's degree. In the most populous state, California, the figure was 90%.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, nationwide 29% of the residents of the United States held college degrees.

The disappearance of intelligence from the curricula is serious, because this means that future social leaders will

not receive information about an important trait in human variation during their formative early adult years. In addition, for the reasons given in the next section, they may have little personal experience with the range of human intelligence in their everyday life.

### 1.3. Why did the courses disappear?

Determining why the study of intelligence has become the academic equivalent of an endangered species would require an extended historical and sociological analysis. All I can do is offer some speculations, based largely on my own observations of trends in academia and American society since 1950. I do not claim to be a historian, so regard this as the notes of a ‘participant observer’.

There has long been a streak of anti-intellectualism in American society. Any claim to superiority of intellect is derided as “putting on airs.” Somewhat inconsistently, the proscription against display applies to mental but not to physical prowess. It is okay to demonstrate your physical superiority, in athletics if you are male and in displays of beauty if you are female, but flashing a Phi Beta Kappa key is proscribed for everyone.<sup>3</sup>

Behavioral evolutionists argue that the emphasis on body form is due to our Paleolithic heritage, where physical form was a signal of reproductive fitness. This does not explain the proscription of displays of intelligence. For that we have to look at the culture. The hero who fought off enemies with fist and gun is embedded our mythology. Millions of Americans will be able to identify Wyatt Earp and Daniel Boone. I suspect that very few can identify Robert Livingstone, the negotiator of the Louisiana Purchase, or William Seward, the negotiator of the Alaska Purchase.

Anti-elitism has another root. Americans are uncomfortable with discussions of social class, even though the United States has a greater disparity in the distribution of wealth than do most comparable nations. The fact that intelligence test scores correlate positively with socioeconomic status (SES) can be used as an argument that elitism is a natural outcome of the distribution of intelligence (Herrnstein, 1973; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). If we combine this with a (mistaken) belief that genetic contributions to intelligence, which undeniably do exist, imply that mental competence is fixed at birth, then an emphasis on the importance of intelligence is dissonant with the Horatio Alger “strive and succeed, work and win” attitude.

A second reason for the downgrading of intelligence is that Americans, and especially educated American families, move in social circles where there is a limited range of intelligence (Murray, 2012). The same thing is true of the coming generation of college students.

College entrance is substantially a cognitive screening process. Table 1 presents the interquartile ranges in SAT

<sup>1</sup> Five of the presidents; George W. and George H.W. Bush, Clinton, Ford and Taft received degrees from Yale. Four; Theodore and Franklin Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Obama received degrees from Harvard (George W. Bush received degrees from both Yale and Harvard). Hoover graduated from Stanford. Three others graduated from similarly elite private institutions; Wilson (Johns Hopkins), Coolidge (Amherst) and Nixon (Duke). Of the other seven, two were from the military academies (Eisenhower, Carter), three (Harding, Johnson and Reagan) graduated from small colleges, and two (McKinley and Truman) did not attend college.

<sup>2</sup> Chronicle of Higher Education, June 12, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> A glance at supermarket and airport newsstand magazine displays shows where popular culture puts its values. Occasionally there are copies of *The Economist* and *Discover*. There are always copies of *Sports Illustrated* (including, in season, the swimsuit issue) and several magazines offering, with illustrations, advice to both females and males on how to sculpt the body.

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