

How to Make America Smart Again

Over the past week America has been fascinated and appalled by the latest college admissions cheating scandal. Much of the attention has been focused on the bribing of coaches to get kids into school with fake athletic credentials. But the even more absurd part of the scandal is that parents [were paying between \\$15,000 and \\$75,000 per test](#) to help their children get a better score on the SAT.

The parents seem to believe that the SAT was a mere hurdle to be overcome by whatever means necessary. Once the child was admitted to the college, they would be swept along into a life of wealth and prestige. That's not entirely wrong, of course. As economist [Bryan Caplan says](#), "If you can get your less-than-brilliant, less-than-driven child admitted, he'll probably get to impersonate a standardly awesome Ivy League graduate for the rest of his life."

It's true there's a correlation between scoring well on the SAT and getting into a good college, as well as a correlation between a college degree and social mobility. But the cheating parents seem to think there is a direct line between "score well on the SAT" and "economic security." The reality is the test is a mere proxy. As the psychologist John Carroll once observed, the verbal SAT is essentially a test of "advanced vocabulary knowledge."

Seven years ago the renowned educator E. D. Hirsch, Jr. pointed out that the "correlation between vocabulary size and life chances are as firm as any correlations in educational research." As [Hirsch adds](#),

Of course, vocabulary isn't perfectly correlated with knowledge. People with similar vocabulary sizes may vary

significantly in their talent and in the depth of their understanding. Nonetheless, there's no better index to accumulated knowledge and general competence than the size of a person's vocabulary. Simply put: knowing more words makes you smarter.

We tend to equate "smart" with having a high IQ and assume it's an innate and unchangeable characteristic. But the type of "smart" Hirsch is talking about—one that leads to economic success and general flourishing—can be increased through effort.

Rather than point to research that confirms this point, let me try to persuade you based on a natural experiment where I was the subject.

In January 1987, during my senior year of high school, I took the SAT and scored 620. While it was above the national average (507 at the time) it was well below what I needed to get into my preferred school (University of Texas). After graduation I went to the University of North Texas and—as my SAT score predicted—I floundered. After my first year, I dropped out and joined the Marines.

Thirteen years later I ended up taking the SAT test again. I was encouraging a few of my junior enlisted Marines to apply for a commissioning program, which required a qualifying score on the SAT. A few of the Marines were hesitant so to encourage them I agreed to help them study and take the test myself. When the results came back I found my math score was the same (terrible) but I had scored a perfect 800 on the verbal section.

Getting that score as a 31-year-old in his last year of college was less impressive than it would have been as a 17-year-old high school student. But it was still a drastic change. My IQ had not increased so what accounted for the difference? The answer, as Hirsch would say, was that the SAT

was measuring my vocabulary, which had significantly expanded because I had read considerably more than I had in high school. While I had been an infrequent reader in my teens I became a voracious reader in my twenties (mostly out of boredom in the pre-Internet age).

Improving my score on the SAT didn't help my life outcomes. But the knowledge I acquired from reading allowed me to achieve considerably more with my modest intellect than would have otherwise been possible. Could the same process help others?

Hirsch believes it can, though it takes work. Those looking for a shortcut might think that vocabulary flashcards will lead to these cognitive gains. But Hirsch explains why a large vocabulary results not from memorizing word lists but from "acquiring knowledge about the social and natural worlds" and occurs through a method called "content-based instruction."

The advantages of content-based instruction are enormous. One is that the topic itself is interesting, so the student has a strong motivation to understand what is being said or written. But an even more important advantage is that immersion in a topic provides the student with a referential and verbal context that is gradually made familiar, which encourages correct guesses of word meanings at a much more rapid pace than would be possible in an unfamiliar context. Psychologists refer to certain skills as being "domain-specific," so perhaps a better name for content-based language acquisition would be "domain immersion." The idea is to immerse students in a domain long enough to make them familiar with the context—and thus able to learn words faster.

This will be an unsurprising finding to any adults who have developed a field of expertise in their occupation or their hobbies. It also reveals why we don't learn that much from our

college experience: we simply aren't immersed in a domain enough to understand its context.

Schools that do immerse their students in a subject improve their life outcomes. Hirsch notes that the success of Catholic schools in raising all students, rich or poor, to high levels of achievement is largely attributed to their strong focus on subject-matter knowledge. "Many other factors were at work: discipline, focus, expectations, all the many complexities that help determine school outcomes," says Hirsch. "But at the heart of the matter were the lessons themselves, which, in these Catholic schools, followed a cumulative sequence. The schools employed domain immersion *avant la lettre*."

Hirsch concludes that by saying that it isn't overstating the case to say that the "most secure way to predict whether an educational policy is likely to help restore the middle class is to focus on the question: Is this policy likely to expand the vocabularies of 12th-graders?"

Even if you're well past 12 grade, you can still do your part to make America smarter. And you don't need to wait for a change in educational policy to begin. You just need to do more reading.

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