

much less information about intellectual capacity . . . though that poor performance may speak volumes about educational opportunity. My worry is the ease with which poor performance gets interpreted as an accurate measure of intelligence, and the effect that interpretation has on the test-taker, both personally and societally.

This is not a call for a simplified egalitarianism. I am not denying the obvious fact that people come to any pursuit with different interests, talents, knacks for things, motivations, capabilities. Nor am I claiming that all bodies of knowledge and expressions of mind are of the same level of cognitive complexity and social importance. All the cultures I'm familiar with make judgments about competence in the domains that matter to them. (Though ours is more obsessed than any I know with developing measures of the mind and schemes to rank them.) No, the distressing thing is that both in our institutional systems and in our informal talk we tend to label entire categories of work and the people associated with them in ways that generalize, erase cognitive variability, and diminish whole traditions of human activity. Attributions of merit and worth flow throughout the process. We order, we rank, we place at steps upon a ladder rather than appreciating an abundant and varied cognitive terrain.

*Skill.* Let's begin with the *American Heritage Dictionary*. Skill is "proficiency, facility, or dexterity that is acquired or developed through training or experience." In traditional usage, this proficiency would be related to the use of body or hand, though more recently, the word *skill* has come to apply to a wide range of activities. We talk, for example, of communication skills or general problem-solving skills.

It is important to remember, however, that what gets defined as a skill is historically and culturally determined, and this process is of special significance in labeling kinds of work. The politics and power plays by which particular interest groups get one kind of work categorized as "skilled" and another as "semiskilled" or "unskilled" have significant economic and social consequences. Another historical phenomenon to note here is the increasing role school has played over the past century in developing and certifying skills that, in previous eras, would have been developed within the job setting itself. The value that a skill has is also determined by time and place. In the rhetoric of the "new economy," for example, communication skills or general problem-solving skills or the ability to work in teams are privileged, while more specific mechanical skills—associated with conventional blue-collar work—tend to be perceived as less valuable. All of these processes of definition and the status they confer involve attributions of cognition and intelligence.