

Introduction to a skit performed at the George E. P. Box Memorial Conference

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I met George in 1968 at the long-running hit show that he called The Monday Night Beer Session that met in the basement of his house in Shorewood Hills and later in Fitchburg. That's a long time ago.

Bill Hunter suggested that I should go the beer session and talk about a class project I was doing. I'm an engineer and this was only my second statistics course and I didn't know much except factorial designs and the method of least squares. The idea of discussing a modeling problem Professor Box was unsettling. Bill said it would be good because George liked engineers. So, I starting going and it was good. I sat in the back and wondered if I dared take a beer (Feuerbach brand, an appropriate choice for doing statistics because no two cases were alike).

I attended a great many beer sessions over almost thirty years, and watched George give quick tutorials, practical suggestions, and encouragement for anyone who had a problem and wanted to use statistics. No problem too small and no problem too difficult. George was always helpful and friendly, and never discouraging. Week after week we observed the cycle of discovery and iterative experimentation. We saw real examples that "All models are wrong, but some are useful." We saw statistics as a catalyst for scientific change, and how scientific problems catalyze ideas for doing statistics.

I left Madison in 1969 to work for a German consulting firm and when I returned to the UW Civil and Environmental Engineering Department in 1971 Bill Hunter and I became very good friends. We had lunch together once a week and most weeks we got together to work on some research. We always had a project of some kind and we published about 20 papers together. I first went to the Center for Quality and Productivity Improvement because I Bill told me that he had meetings that lasted no more than one hour – a rare thing in a university – and I wanted to see it. That's where I met Jose, Ian Hau, Conrad, Soren, Steve Czarniak, Tim Kramer, and others. Before that I had worked Lars Pallesen, Andy Jaworski, and Alison Pollack. So, statisticians were a great help throughout my career.

George and I became good friends about the time Bill Hunter went to Nigeria on a Fulbright Fellowship. We had a party in my back yard and did the first of many skits with George. Sue and I had lived in Nigeria so we had some stories to tell. Bill would write me letters and say, "It's just like the skit."

So, I knew that George liked skits and we did many together over the years. He liked students that were good at doing skits and he thought working with them would be fun.

The last skit I did with George was on his birthday October 19, 2012. It was with Brian Joiner and Stu Hunter. This was a “boy’s night in”. For years George and I had a night out twice a month. This was the Potato Club because we started at a pub on the beltline that had a special of roast pork with potatoes and gravy – and Leinenkugel red beer.

I memory of this we will do a short skit.

I should explain why there are jokes about sociologists. A statistician once said to me at a party, “I think I know you – you’re a sociologist aren’t you”. I said I was an engineer. Shortly after this I met a real sociologist – I asked what kind of work he did. The answer was *number crunching*. I told this to Bill Hunter and he said, “Sociologists are well known for using an ax to hack their way through an open door.” That is how sociologists were introduced to our skits.

INTERVIEWS FOR A NEW DIRECTOR OF THE CQPI

The University of Wisconsin interviewed applicants for Director of the Center for Quality and Productivity Improvement. Transcripts of interviews with some of the losing candidates have been discovered by our Freedom of Information Act request.

Some applicants did not understand that the work of the Center used statistics, but each had some idea what quality and productivity meant.

CANDIDATE 1

Q You are a Computer Scientist.
I believe you were in the military.

A. Yes, the Army.

Q. How long were you in the Army?

A. Five foot eleven.

Q Computer Science seems a good background for our job.

"If you boarded an airliner and discovered that your team of programmers had been responsible for the flight control software, would you feel safe?"

A. Yes. With my team's software, the plane is unlikely to even taxi as far as the runway, let alone take off.

Q. I hope you’re kidding.

A. I am. Our programs work flawlessly if our instructions are obeyed.

Q How would you respond to these quality improvement situations if they were reported to your team?

Q Left main inside tire almost needs replacement.

A Easy. Almost replaced left inside tire.

Q Something loose in cockpit.

A Something tightened in the cockpit.,

Q Evidence of leak on right main landing gear.

A Evidence removed.

Q. We are unfamiliar with that approach to problem solving. What are your management principles?

A. I have five basic principles:

1. A complex system that does not work is invariably found to have evolved from a simpler system that worked perfectly.
2. Whatever happens, behave as though you meant it to happen.
3. When you get to the point where you really understand a thing, it's probably obsolete.
4. For every action, there is an equal and opposite malfunction.
5. To err is human. To blame a computer for the mistakes is even more human.
6. The number one cause of poor solutions is bad problems.

Q. But that wasn't five principles. It was six.

A. Was it? Oh, well, to err is human.

Q How about fund raising.

A. My fund-raising slogan is "I have upped my pledge. Up Yours!"

CANDIDATE 2

Q Please come in and tell us about yourself.

A I'll sit at the head of the table.

Q But it's a round table.

A Where I sit will be the head.

Q. We're not sure what kind of work you do but we have some statements from your job evaluations at The \ University of mmmm.

Please don't comment until I have finished reading the list.

(1) His staff would follow him anywhere, but only out of morbid curiosity.

(2) He sets low personal standards and consistently fails to achieve them.

(3) This employee should go far, and the sooner he starts, the better.

(4) He certainly takes a long time to make his pointless.

(5) He brings a lot of joy whenever he leaves the room.

(6) If you see two people talking and one looks bored, he's the other one.

Any comment

A. I'm pleased that my colleagues paid any attention to what I was doing.

Q Aside from seating arrangements, you seem pretty easy going to be a director of anything.

Quickly give us your philosophy of management.

A Have a Plaster man!

Q What? Oh - you mean master plan.

A That's what I said.

Have a Plaster man!

Flo with the go.

Hollow your farts

Have some soap in your hole

Q Thank you very much.

Ask the next candidate to come in.

CANDIDATE 3

Q Your application say that you are a number crunching sociologist.

Do you think a sociologist would be a good director of the Center?

A Maybe. It could possibly work.

Q Are you always so indecisive.

A. I used to be. Now I'm not so sure.

Q You must be very good with numbers. Is that correct?

A It can be difficult. I went into a bar that had a

The sign said *Happy Hour – All you can drink for \$5.*

I ordered \$10 worth.

Q If you can get 50% off, or two for one, which is better?

A I have always liked big discounts.

Q Let's try arithmetic. What is seven times six?"

A Sixty-one.

Q I think it is sixty-nine.

- A Come on, it can't be both. It must be one or the other.
- Q I suppose you can hire someone to do your calculations.
You are the President of the American Sociology Statistics committee.
- A Right – ASS – if you like acronyms.
ASS collects data voraciously, stores it in waterproof, fire-proof boxes, and waits for opportunities to crunch it and write reports.
- The organizing principle of ASS is based on some of this research:
*There are two types of people:
Those who divide people into two types,
and those who don't.*
- Q It's an interesting name. Tell me how it was selected.
- A First we tried the Sociologist Statistical Association – SSA. But it is unpronounceable – Sssss Ahhh. J
Just does work.
Then we wanted Statistical Association for Sociology – SAS. Easy to say – strong – memorable.
But it was already taken by some second-rate outfit.
- Q Second rate? Is that fair? I thought they were very good.
- A They do have bigger computers than we have.
But they don't know a damn thing about sociology.
- Q So you got to ASS. Same three letters for the acronym.
- A Yes. And when pronounced correctly it has a very pleasant sound.
We use the British pronunciation – with the short A - Ahhhh SS.
- Q Classy. Most people wouldn't say it that way.
- A Classy is right. I want to put it on my license plate.
The people who award the special plates didn't like it.
They thought it might offend some people;
- Q Did they?
- A I can't imagine why the name of a scientific statistical organization would be offensive.
- Q It seems someone here is lacking imagination.
- A That brings up another problem. A license plate needs to have 6 characters –
I needed 3 more to go with ASS.
- Q Did you try SMT
- A Yes, but many non-scientists weren't smart enough to get it.
- Q In that case, I suggest you try DMB – DMB ASS.
- A Good idea – Data Management ?- whaaat - What's the B for”
- Q It's awkward to explain.
Let's just say you needed three more letters and A was already taken.
Tell about some other research projects
- A We studied stations. A bus station is where a bus stops.
A train station is where a train stops.
Why did the Dean give me a work station for my desk?
- Q Any other research we might find interesting?
- A These are a few.
Does teen pregnancy drop off after the age of 25?

If a deaf child signs swear words, and his mother washes his hands with soap, will the swearing stop?
What if there were no hypothetical questions?
Do infants enjoy infancy as much as adults enjoy adultery?
If you try to fail, and succeed, which have you done?

Q Those sound almost data free. Tell us about a study where you had data.

A We studied horses, trying to discover what made them different.
Many observations and measurements were made.

Q How many horses were in your study?

A Two.

Q That is an unusual sample size.
But I suppose you sociologists have your special methods.
What did you learn?

A The white horse was smaller than the black horse.

Q Thanks for your time. You are excused.
It is true that 99% of sociologists give the rest a bad name.

CANDIDATE 4

Q. You are the second sociologist we have interviewed.
We are surprised your profession has such an interest
in quality and productivity improvement.
Do you know about ASS?

A Oh, yes. Very good organization. When I worked for them ASS polled one million people
in the state of Vermont to discover what Americans see as the greatest threats to the American way of life.

Q I believe you asked the Statistical Consulting Lab to help with data analysis.
A They said the problem was too difficult because Vermont has only 630,000 citizens.
Our reply was, "Yes, of course it's difficult.
But we wanted one million respondents to the questionnaire.
Questioning people all over the United States would be even more difficult.
The organization has a very small budget for travel, telephone, and postage.
And tiny little computers for email and texting.
The ASS motto is "We do a little with a little."

Q What were the Poll results?
What are the greatest threats, according to this latest ASS poll?
It must have been something big, like Ebola or Zika virus, rising ocean levels, Chinese tariffs.
Or – toxic blue-green algae in Lake Mendota, or red tide in Florida
How about Brexit? Or bio-geo-neuro-chemo-things. .

A The biggest threat is the metric system!
People are afraid the centimeters are coming.

Q Ooooooh – the centimeters
How about those other metrics – the liter, meter and peter?

A What's the peter?

Q Hush – hush. That's for undercover work

Q A bottle of wine has always been 750 milliliters. What is going to be now?
A 750 cubic centimeters – it's the centimeters again.
I'm worried about painting. One pint of paint will cover 100 square feet.

I need to paint 100 sq. ft but there will be no more pints of paint.

Q Do you agree that our U.S. system of measures is more interesting.
Pounds and bushels and pecks.
Furlongs, chains, rods, feet and miles.
Gallons and 2 cups make a pint.
Square feet, acres and acre-feet

A I do.

Q How do you like these units
365 days of drinking low calories beer is one light year
One million microphones is a megaphone - Opps – that's metric
453.6 Graham crackers is one pound cake

A Best we ask some statisticians. They know all about errors in metrics.
And centimeters are going to be a big error.

Q Is PI part of the metric system that you dislike so much?

A Not sure. Whatever. It should be changed to something more simple.
Something like PI equals 3.0.
It was good enough for the Babylonians.
And let's do away with negative numbers at the same time.

Q 3.0 was OK for a while.
Then 2000 years later, Archimedes said it should be larger.

A Do you know that the roundest knight at King Arthur's round table
was Sir Cumference. He got round from too much pi.

Q March is PI month – and March 14 is PI day

A So, let's make PI equal March 14. Simple – pi is 3.14.
That should be close enough.
And 3/14 is Einstein's birthday.

Q That makes June 28 – that's 6.28 - two-PI day.

A I wish we could have 3-PI day.

Q Well, sure, we can do something more special.

In 1897, the State of Indiana Legislature, by a vote of 67–0, PI equal to 3.2.

That's great. George's birthday is Oct. 18 or 10.18.

Divide 10.18 by PI = 3.2 and you get 3.2.

So today is 3.2 times 3.2 day – PI-squared day.

In memory of George Edward Pelham Box,
we declare October 18 to be, forevermore, PI-SQUARED DAY

And that, as they say folks, is part of the story of how the University of Wisconsin maintains the very high quality of its administrative staff.

PERSONALITY TEST

This is a simple test that will identify your role model in the list below:

1. Albert Einstein
2. Oprah Winfrey
3. Dalai Lama

4. Queen Elizabeth II
5. Bill Gates
6. Gandhi
7. Winston Churchill
8. Babe Ruth
9. George Box
10. John F. Kennedy

- 1) Pick your favorite number between 1 and 9
- 2) Multiply by 3 then
- 3) Add 3
- 4) Then again, multiply by 3
- 5) You'll get a 2 or 3 digit number....
- 6) Add the digits together