



A Date with Data

To start this story we have to first take a step 'back', to a half-remembered episode from school days. We're in high school Physics class. I like this class a lot; both physics and mathematics were fun for me, although I should hastily add that before you get the idea that I am an 'egg-head', you should know that I never went any farther with either subject, and now have only a superficial knowledge of them.

But physics was definitely fun, especially the 'labs'. This was before the days of classroom computers, so the experiments were all completely 'hands on': running little vehicles down tracks to measure acceleration, seeing how high various balls would bounce, things like that. It was just play, lightly disguised as learning. There was one aspect of the study though, that completely defeated me, and that was the requirement for careful record-keeping during the experiments. Collecting 'good' data was of course the main point of each experiment, as this would then be analyzed to demonstrate some particular point of the lesson. No data, no point.

But I just couldn't do it. I would begin in good faith, setting up a page in my notebook with the appropriate columns or tables, and starting to fill in the numbers as the experiment began, but a few minutes later the thing would just be a mess of cross-outs, corrections, and unreadable scribbles. In truth, the only reason I was able to pass the course was the fact that we usually worked in pairs, and one of my good friends was very good at this. His notebooks were beautiful - the numbers all neatly written in perfect columns, each with a proper heading, and everything completely well organized.

So I bounced the balls, he wrote it all down, and we got through just fine.

Step forward a few decades, and we find Dave in his workroom in Tokyo in the early days of his attempts to 'make it' as a printmaker. He has no teacher, and for the most part works by trial and error. Although woodblock printmaking is a very 'simple' process on the face of it, there are of course a lot of 'variables' involved: the moisture level of the paper, the density of the pigment in the bowl, the size of the brush, the strength of the baren, how much pressure is applied, and for how long ... the list goes on and on and on. For a beginner, the large amount of possible variation makes it extremely difficult to diagnose problems. Was the pigment too weak, or was the pressure not enough? Which was it? The only way to find out is to experiment with various combinations ... keep good records of what you are doing ... and thus arrive at an understanding of the proper process.

But - as we have seen - Dave doesn't 'do' good record-keeping of this kind. He tries this, and tries that, experimenting until he gets the desired result (if he's lucky), and then moves on. A few months later, when the same kind of problem arises, he can remember that he had the problem before, and that he was able to solve it, but ...

That's right. He has no idea just what he did back then, and so has to revert to 'trial and error' to get through. Eventually, after enough repetitions of this redundant process, he does gradually begin to get things fixed in memory, and over the years has become a competent craftsman.

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This is not a confession. This is a point of pride. None of the old craftsmen kept any kind of records at all; when a printer was faced with the job of re-printing a set of blocks on which he had previously worked, he didn't reach for a notebook to see what pigment mixes he formerly used. He simply looked at the sample image for a minute, then reached for his tools. And the result would be 'bang on'. The accumulated experience was in his head, not on sheets of paper.

Why is this relevant just now? As we will discover next week, Dave is about to be 'sent back' to the classroom. Sometime in the next couple of months, he will be preparing a blank sheet of paper with columns and tables, all ready for the 'numbers' to be filled in, to carefully track the progress of a very important set of 'experiments'.

This time though, there is no 'physics partner' handy to save the day for him. It's going to be sink or swim. And as things look right now ... it's probably going to be sink!

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