

The Problem with Perfect Metrics

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary + Discussion | 70-85 minutes

BEFORE YOU READ

Talk with a partner. What important human activities become distorted when they are measured too precisely?

1. Match the words (1-6) with the definitions (A-F).

- | | | |
|---------------|-------|---|
| 1. proxy | _____ | A. freedom to make a decision based on judgement |
| 2. perverse | _____ | B. measure or express as a number |
| 3. quantify | _____ | C. having an unintended and harmful effect |
| 4. compliance | _____ | D. making something complex appear too simple |
| 5. discretion | _____ | E. the act of following rules or requests |
| 6. reductive | _____ | F. a measurement used to represent something more complex |

2. Read the article. The bold words are the vocabulary from Activity 1.

1. Organisations often rely on numbers because numbers appear impartial. A school counts test scores, a hospital records waiting times and a company tracks sales. Such measures can reveal real problems, but they are usually a **proxy** for a larger aim: learning, care or useful work. Confusion begins when the proxy is treated as the aim itself.

2. The desire to **quantify** performance is understandable. Large institutions need a way to compare results and identify patterns. Yet a metric can produce **perverse** incentives. If a call centre rewards short calls, employees may end conversations quickly rather than solve a customer's problem. If a school rewards only examination results, less measurable forms of learning may receive less attention.

3. The issue is not that measurement is useless. It is that every measure creates a field of vision and leaves something outside it. A numerical target can encourage **compliance** with a process while discouraging the professional judgement needed for an unusual case. Workers may learn to improve the score rather than improve the service.

4. For this reason, some institutions protect **discretion**: the capacity for teachers, doctors or managers to depart from a rule when the situation requires it. Discretion can be abused, so it needs explanation and review. But a system without it may become efficient only at doing the wrong thing consistently.

5. The deepest danger is a **reductive** view of value. What cannot easily be counted is not necessarily unimportant: trust, curiosity, dignity and long-term resilience may matter precisely because they resist a single score. Good measurement should inform judgement, not replace it.

The Problem with Perfect Metrics

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary + Discussion | 70-85 minutes

UNDERSTAND, DISCUSS AND WRITE

3. Comprehension. Answer in complete sentences. Use the article to help you.

1. Why does the article call a metric a proxy?

2. What is a perverse incentive?

3. How can compliance conflict with good service?

4. Why does the article defend discretion?

5. What is the reductive danger of measurement?

4. Discuss. Talk in small groups. Give reasons and examples.

- Which aspects of education should never be reduced to a number?
- Can discretion coexist with fairness?
- What metric would distort your own work or study?
- How can organisations use data without becoming ruled by it?

5. Homework: Write an opinion paragraph.

Write 220-260 words evaluating one metric used in education, work or public services. Explain what it reveals, what it hides and how it should be used.

The Problem with Perfect Metrics

C2 | Adults / Teens | Reading + Vocabulary + Discussion | 70-85 minutes

ANSWER KEY AND TEACHING NOTE

Vocabulary matching

1. proxy - F
2. perverse - C
3. quantify - B
4. compliance - E
5. discretion - A
6. reductive - D

Comprehension answers

1. Why does the article call a metric a proxy?

It usually represents a broader aim, such as learning or care, rather than being that aim itself.

2. What is a perverse incentive?

It is a reward or pressure that encourages behaviour which harms the intended goal.

3. How can compliance conflict with good service?

Following a fixed process may discourage the professional judgement needed for an unusual case or a customer's real problem.

4. Why does the article defend discretion?

It allows professionals to depart from rules when circumstances require it, although it should be explained and reviewed.

5. What is the reductive danger of measurement?

It may treat complex values as unimportant simply because they cannot be captured by one number.

Teaching note

Compare vocabulary answers before reading. Help learners plan an evaluation of a metric: what it reveals, what it hides and how to use it. Accept accurate comprehension paraphrases and supported personal responses.