

## 'People love metrics': A super sad true love story

ANDREW GIBBONS

*Auckland University of Technology*

### Abstract

*A speaker at a recent conference on higher education stated that "people love metrics." What might make it possible for such a statement to be uttered as if it were true? This paper explores the truth of the love of metrics, through the narrative of Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* and the work of Albert Camus and Martin Heidegger. In Shteyngart's novel the central character, a bit of an intellectual and a hopeless Romantic, questions his identity in a metric-ocratic future. Of particular interest in this paper is the statistically probable future in which the great social network machines no longer sell their hidden user data to the highest bidder – a time in which citizens are a composite of their metrics, a more or less sexy array of 'trend' values. This future looks quite familiar to an academic whose semesters are calculated in student satisfaction ratings, research performance scores, and perhaps the occasional self-assessment out of five. That we might love this future, and that it be a sad love story, is drawn out through the work of Camus's challenge to the ways in which the world is enumerated, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and through Heidegger's suggestion that it is entirely in measurement we dwell as human. The paper concludes by drawing the work of these three authors into the metricocratic spaces of early childhood learning and teaching and the love of an adult world for the child's learning to measure the world.*

**Keywords:** Metrics, Camus, Heidegger, people, love, measuring

### Act I

Amongst scholars, the critique of the progress of the university is perhaps becoming a little stale. A familiar Nietzschean lament hangs over the Readingsian ruins, and there is a sense of sadness in the air that the seemingly obvious problems of institutional purpose, growth, and structure continue to "thoroughly artificial, and that the most fatal weaknesses of the present day are to be ascribed to this artificiality" (Nietzsche, 1910, p. 13).

I have been shaken out of this lament by a few words that offer some hope for the academic life: "people love metrics". I have not fallen in love with the utterer, and I have not fallen in love with the utterance, but like this thing we think to call falling in love, like a Shakespearean moment, I am turned around and upside down and have to look at the world anew. Oh crazy and foolish world in which I live that I must have forgotten of my love for the metric. And now what do I know of love if metrics be its fix'd object?

Yes, this paper developed from the proposition at a conference that "people love metrics" and the interest in taking this to be true. The paper is a journey in questioning this love, and in a style that draws upon the (apparent) charm of a play on love: the comedic moments of an endearing bond; the intensity of making sense of a feeling; the tragedy of giving one's self to the institution; and the excitement of an unravelling of an idea. The journey was laid out in abstract before the theme of love could really take hold, and so for the reader of the abstract there might also be some surprise that the shape of the analysis took a curious turn towards an (all too obvious of course) authority on love. It makes sense to use Shakespeare, and this sense will be the true love story of this work.

So where do we go from this entrance?

Some structure to the play...

Act I: In which I have just attempted to play on the idea of introducing a love story

Act II: The terrain of a metric future explored through the work of a contemporary novelist who mixes love and numbers

Act III: The facts for higher education that take the fiction of absurd enumeration seriously

Act IV: On Camus, the absurd, and measurement as a response

Act V: Heidegger's understanding of the poetic meaning of measurement

Act VI: Measure for measure, or what can we learn from early childhood education

### **Act II: The terrain laid out through the work of a contemporary novelist**

In Gary Shtynegart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010) an intellectual romantic grapples with a sense of identity in what we might come to know as not a meritocratic but a metricocratic future. In other words, in this novel, in our future world, people's lives are determined not simply by what they have been successful at, but by the numerical value that has measured and published the success.

Briefly, the central character is Lenny Abramov. He is in love (hence the title of the story and also the connection between the story and the proposition that people love metrics). He is an absurd man in a world of self-centred expansionism and mindless markets of consumers. In this story his generation Z girlfriend will not save the future with her new collective consciousness and her radical rejection of exploitation. Her capital is communicated in trending values; her valued spaces are the social networks that generate a matrix of metric data, a new virtual exchange, and growth, of daily stocks.

The growth of this future generation, Shtynegart hints, might have something to do with the nature of their higher education experience. The object of Lenny's love studied Images (the major) and Assertiveness (the minor) although it is unclear whether this programme was in media studies, philosophy or psychology – perhaps Assertiveness subsumes all degrees in the future university. While she worries about new fads in brushing her teeth, he is occupied with his status in a business that relieves super rich clients of their anxiety for the future by cryogenically freezing them until a day when science can sort out their mortality issues.

His social life is a play between the real and the virtual – he is drinking with friends at a bar worrying about his life while they are narrating their experiences to anyone that wishes to follow, and of course to 'like' online. Their social network metrics provide a sense, for the reader, of understanding the condition of the absurd future and an absurd hero who holds on to some kind of strange, different, essence – a kind of moral resistance to the matrix that places him outside, but sadly not immune to, a world of trending values. Lenny is in a perpetual anxiety towards the numbers that determine his character second by second. He is determined to stand against his numbers yet he can't resist them, they are irresistible, and they prove the thesis that people love their metrics – an explicit kind of love that reveals the mobile citizen is a joke. Openness, change, innovation, creativity, potential are all trending values that are disciplined and exploited through the social network. Do we want to search for true love here?

### **Act III: The facts that take the fiction seriously**

Like *Super Sad True Love Story*, university strategic plans narrate a metricocratic future. These documents bind universities to each other and to the powerful narratives of global economic senses and sensibilities. This section explores examples from strategic plans and then engages them in a brief critical analysis of metrics.

Strategic plans provide their own metre through their talk about research, teaching and learning: we, the people of the university, must innovate, generate, and communicate: "New Zealanders must be not only academically and technically equipped, *but also* creative, innovative and connected" (2012, p. 3, emphasis added). Understanding this language from a metric position, we see that the university has the problem of enumerating not just the technical role of the academic (let us call these the research outputs and the student

satisfaction ratings) but also the creativity, innovation and connection of the individual. We might also ask how we measure the strategically diminished purpose of being critic and conscience, but that shall be asked elsewhere.

The solution is as yet unclear, however it is very clear that in higher education institutions, as in a corporate world concerned with meaningful data on its health, strategise enumerated networks that crunch the daily grind of their collective academic human resource into evidence of where a whole institution fits into a bizarre race. Bizarre because, looking at strategic plans, the race is being run as if each institution is doing its own thing, and yet the visionary documents compare so thoroughly. This may not be a problem for the measurement of the effectiveness of the academy, yet one of the strongest marketing tools for these universities is to talk about the possibilities of defining the future in a changing world. If all of the strategies are the same, and the measurement of their success is the same, there would be limited scope for the kind of innovative thinking that is also loved, and we might as well have just one university. Entertaining the branding for a moment, we could imagine that this university is the engine of the new New Zealand (Massey University, 2012). Engines run effectively on metrics. Onboard computers provide assumed faultless metrics, data on the smooth operation.

The future of the university in an uncertain world as a technically and administratively known and resolved problem involves more rhetoric than it does restructure. Key to the rhetoric is this thing called global economic recession. Times are tough and as such the university is central to navigating out of the challenges of our times. The incessant talk of the parlous state of economic and social affairs, that lends a science fiction quality to these documents, also unites the institutions. That all universities have strategically articulated the world as an entity on the brink of ruins suggests that whatever it is that lays waste to the university has been let out of the box.

The purpose of the strategic plan is then efficient management of resources and so it may be no surprise that metrics have a role to play. Priority funds head to assurance quality products rather than research and development – the development of the best curriculum will be decided through administrative enumeration of what has already happened. And coming up with new measures is an industry of its own that costs higher education. Staff satisfaction surveys are a convenient example. Or are they? Do they actually count as metrics?

While some authors explain metrics as typically being a result of the association of data, information, measures, and a 'root question', a systematic but creative sets of indicative ideas that is only required if the question does not require a single quantitative measurement (for instance how many research outputs have you published) (see for instance Klubeck, 2011) others seem to apply the concept of metrics to any recently generated data that attempts to create a measure of comparative success between academics and institutions (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2012; Marginson, 2009). Klubeck (2011) challenges that these latter are not metrics, at best, at worst they are the worst examples of metrics because they are misused by amateurs who do not respect the unreliability of data, focus on improving numbers and not experiences, keep the full picture of the metrics hidden with senior management, use metrics to manipulate people's behaviours, and in general do not realise that "metrics are dangerous" (p. 304).

The possibility that higher education quality assurance metrics are indeed poor and not engendering better quality student experiences and academic research was predicted to necessitate stronger global metric systems (van Damme, 2002). These worldwide systems emerged during the 2000s and soon went 'viral', with higher education executives and governmental agencies adjusting their "strategic behaviours" towards rapid implementation of policies and practices that would appeal to the trending metrics (Marginson, 2009, p. 41). While some argued that these would lead to more protection of the academic community, others regarded the community as needing the metric protection from the academy and its dangerous sense of entitlement to public purses (Palfreyman, 2007).

We can see that there is an element in reporting that is reasonable. The academy is accountable to the society that finances its research and teaching. The phenomena of a competitive knowledge economy and the implications of that economy for the expansion of higher education have reinforced the value of what academics do. A society might love that the measurement of academics keeps them honest to the investment, however the love of the measurement might hide concerns about the reliability of the data and the cost to the country of

generating unreliable data both in terms of the investment of the systems and those that run them, the handing over of the systems to corporate interests who are certainly not critic and conscience of society and whose sense of innovation, creativity and connection operates around a narrow terrain of self interest, and also for the impact of the measuring on the quality of what is being measured. In other words, academics measuring their research and teaching quality are not enhancing their research and teaching quality, of course this is a bit of speculation however it is supported by the challenge that metrics lead to safe scoring research rather than innovative work that risks missing the metric (Butler & McAllister, 2011). It is not clear how onerous reporting on one's research is, and it is not clear how that putting upon the academic to engage in metric self-reporting impacts on the quality of their research. That the New Zealand review process for research performance has proposed significantly adjusting the quantity of reporting might support this speculation. There are other emerging stories of a falling out of love for metrics. Ako Aotearoa (2012), for instance, has decided that impact factors are best narrated in researcher-generated stories.

It's the scope of the movement of metrics that evokes the concern. The score is totalizing, it seems to be writing all strategic direction for universities to speak a narrow language of progress, in which branding is the university story, and in which an absurd playing out of metrics means that universities cut and paste academic CVs, good teachers, new and or isolated academics are decreasingly employable, and ironically those with the worst outputs are those managers that police outputs and put out the newspeak of metric visions (Bignall, 2102) and the interest becomes more about companies that generate the metrics, companies that help institutions approach the metrics.

#### **Act IV: On Camus the absurdist**

Given the trouble, above, with the kind of enumerated world we might live in, the next concerns might be how to live and/or how to rebel. This section explores the first of these possibilities through the work of Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1991). While Camus is regarded to have moved on from his thinking in the myth (Thody, 1957), particularly in relation to the rebellion, it is important to consider that this essay provided Camus with the possibility of moving on, and so for us to move on from our love of metrics, or at least to jettison what we do not want of that love, then we might listen to Camus on the absurd.

Camus begins his interrogation with the question of whether, having seen the object of our love lying dead in front of us, should we take the apothecary's poison? What happens, more simply, when there is no more meaning? In this sense Camus regards the absurd as "a tool which helps a person determines the direction to follow, or the views or principles to adopt in life" (Baskya, 2009, p. 9).

The idea of human existence being absurd begins with recognition of existence, a consciousness that asks itself about its purpose. The absurd is "denseness" and "strangeness" (Camus, 1991, p. 14); it is the "meaningless pantomime" and the "stranger" in the mirror (p. 15), "born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world" (p. 29). However this is not a fractal play with the word, there is the serious business of understanding what to do, to explore "how people get away ... and why people stay" (p. 29). The absurd is traced through both its philosophical writing and the rationality of science because this problem requires evidence; however Camus' concern is not to reveal more evidence of the absurd but rather to explore the implications for action.

Where is measurement in all of this? It starts with a comparison, "the magnitude of the absurdity will be in direct ratio to the distance between the two terms of my comparison" – here the terms are human and world (p. 30). The rhythm and pattern of the recurring work day measures a blissful ignorance that one is shaken from by a realisation that there is a question, and that question is 'why?'

Camus is perhaps less interested in saving us from a mechanical life, although it is clear that he is in favour of a poetic existence through his turn to the artist, rather he is interested in the condition that makes one unhappy with the mechanical life. This element in Camus' critique of the absurd resists a romantic turn to a particular myth of existence, in that it can refuse to say that the mechanical life is not our true human life but that is not to say that he is not interested in a moral or humane existence. What he is interested in is the conditions and the

outcome of questioning that human life, and of its ultimate rejection. In part the evidence for this lies in the possibility of the rejection of a poetic life in that a poetic and a mechanical life lead to the same end, they amount to the same. A mechanical life might be as well lived as a poetic life on the condition that neither is mistaken for being better and hence having claim to some kind of meaning.

Hitherto, and it has not been a wasted effort, people have played on words and pretended to believe that refusing to grant a meaning to life necessarily leads to declaring that it is not worth living. In truth, there is no necessary common measure between these two judgements. One merely has to refuse to be misled by the confusions, divorces, and inconsistencies previously pointed out (p. 8).

Intelligence cannot rescue us from the absurd; rather it is further evidence that the world is absurd. Faced with the problem of being uncertain about the nature of the world, and just of being, we must find a way to resolve our play in the ruins of these ideas, and measurement has a role to play here. Camus reckons while "the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies, on the other hand, my freedom of action" (p. 57). In the absurd we are more present; we give up on the future and on the debts to it that take the form of investments for tomorrow. If we cannot break, or put some distance between, this concern for the future and the importance of meaning, then having a meaning to life is the thing that we would seek to find ourselves free of in order to be free.

What "counts is not the best living but the most living" (p. 61) and so Camus sets to exploring what he means to talk of 'most.' Of interest here to Camus are the things that we wish to measure, the norms, the codes we apply to measurement, and most importantly the living that is measured. He argues that to "two men living the same number of years, the world always provides the same sum of experiences" (p. 62).

Do two 42-year-old academics live equivalent years in relation to the sum of their experiences? The answer should depend on the measure. If the measure of an experience is locked into the seconds of a day then perhaps the answer is yes. If it is not then there is some other classification of the object of measurement. If it is not temporal, then it is something that might be increased or decreased within those 100 years. There are important implications for this. A 40-year life might be set into doing twice as much as an 80-year life. This brings us back to a problem of definition. Perhaps we can leave this problem because of its implication that we will then get waylaid and the purpose for Camus is to get on with living (with of course the exception that the asking about the definition of the measure could be the waylaying), he is arguing against suicide as the logical conclusion for a meaningless existence and he is using the idea of freedom. So what is it worth deciding whether we had just one day of this freedom, or 100 years through which we never had the cause to think that there was a point to life? Length of life is perhaps not so important if one can get to doing a lot of it.

If the code is 'do more' then what is the ethics? Camus works through any concerns one might have for the possibility of no appeal to a future or a higher set of values. The absurd academic applies her courage and her wisdom. In courage she lives "*without appeal*" and in reasoning she "knows her limits" (p. 66, emphasis in original). She does not give up on ethics. The recognition of the absurd is not an immunity to a care for others, rather she explores an "ethics of quantity" (p. 79). In order to have an ethics of quantity Camus argues we need to rethink what it means to measure. Here we might turn to Heidegger.

#### **Act V: On Heidegger the poetic**

Heidegger explores the idea that it is the essence of being human "that they *must ever learn to dwell*" (Heidegger, 1993, p. 363, emphasis in original), language that he takes from the poetry of Hölderlin and extends in *Poetically Man Dwells* (1971). Dwelling invokes a relationship of caring for, and of giving presence to, and includes building.

But how is "man" – and this means every man and all the time – supposed to dwell poetically? Does not all dwelling remain incompatible with the poetic? Our dwelling is harassed by the housing shortage. Even if that were not so, our dwelling today is harassed by work, made insecure

by the hunt for gain and success, bewitched by the entertainment and recreation industry (1971, p. 213).

Heidegger suggests that we can find a solution to the problem of our industrial enumeration and in the understanding of man's dwelling. Of particular interest here is the measuring that is dwelling. Heidegger claims "dwelling depends on an upward-looking measure-taking of the dimension, in which the sky belongs just as much as the earth" (p. 221). Like the bridge that is, for Heidegger, of interest in the gathering that is building (Heidegger, 1993), measuring gathers together the ground under our feet and our desire for the divine. "Measure-taking gauges the between, which brings the two, heaven and earth, to one another. This measure-taking has its own *metron*, and thus its own metric" (1971, p. 221). The poets can see this:

The roof holds up the sky. The foundations stand firmly in the earth. All humanity is therefore able to stand in the strand of life between, sustained by the strength of your ancestral house. Remember that it will always transcend the ebb and flow of human folly (Ihimaera, 2005, p. 110).

For Heidegger metrics is a question of the essence of being; it is the 'security' of being, and it is also the essence of the poetic in the revealing of being. That we measure, that we put metre to the world, is our poetic essence. However, understanding that this might be a forgotten essence, and that there are perhaps different ways of understanding measuring, we might look to the nature of measuring.

That consists in man's first of all taking the measure which then is applied in every measuring act. In poetry the taking of measure occurs. To write poetry is measure-taking, understood in the strict sense of the word, by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being (1971, pp. 221-222).

So while measurement and metrics might include the study of the world through the metre of a poem, measuring has also taken the form of a metric that codifies, classifies, delimits, and homogenises using the objects of measurement, the systems that provide the cybernetic feedback and engender the organic, knowable, machine: "our unpoetic dwelling, its incapacity to take the measure, derives from a curious excess of frantic measuring and calculating" (p. 228). We might gather all the empirical data we need to have no questions left, and still not know what to do, in fact; should we find all the numbers, we might then have nothing to love.

Heidegger says "poetry, as the gauging of that strange measure, becomes ever more mysterious" (p. 224) and that this must be so. Heidegger is challenging us to ask, should our time as mortals taken on this earth, underneath this sky, be an unpoetic one? That there might be a more or less poetic measuring and that it is only the poetic that the measuring is a dwelling (and what is more that one might be unpoetic) is for Heidegger the evidence of the poetic, analogising that for "a man to be blind, he must remain a being by nature endowed with sight" (p. 228).

We might then consider the possibility that metrics are not simplifications of what is said about how we perform in the world in order to make such performance more efficient, but rather that metrics is about the study of the rhythm of what we say. We might find ourselves in love with metrics when they are no longer devices that yield 'sterile' configurations of the tragic proportions of our lives.

What wakes us up, removes the screen, reveals the absurdity, measures the dwelling, questions our reasons, and sheds light on our illusions? The metric does. What about metrics understood in relation to metre, the love of the steady rhythm, the pulse that reminds, that assures us, us of our life, is this what we love about metrics, that it keeps our blood flowing? In order to do this we will keep Shakespeare's metre close at hand.

#### **Act VI: Measure for measure**

In this last section the creative and sustaining metric is explored through the concluding turn to early childhood education. In early childhood education's many forms space is made for making sense of the metre of what is said. I am turning to early childhood education because in the development of an early childhood profession a tension between poetic and scientific metres occurred and, at least at present, the poetic metre holds steady.

Universities have forgotten the poetics of metre in the rush to make sense of the data as standing reserve. Academic metrics enumerate a super sad academic life. The work of Camus and Heidegger helps us trace the measuring of the academic as a disciplining that keeps the academy bounded by economic knowledge – yet even those in the business of metrics (Klubeck for instance) would question the ethics of the kind of metrics that academics experience.

In early childhood education the problem of measuring was engaged during the 1990s with the rejection of certain forms of assessment of a child's individual cognitive and behavioural trajectories, these being also closely related to a child's physical development. The purpose of the rejection was to prevent the child from being subjected to technical and instrumental norms of cognitive development. Their instruments were presumed neutral however this screening of certain interests and assumptions about education and about development were called out. The technocratic measurements were shown to infiltrate the thinking that is possible about education (Bowers, 1988). The metrics were no longer uncritically accepted because of the assumed value written into the coding (Bowers, 1988). The scientists clutching a data rich image of the metric child were shouted out of professional practice by a chorus of narrative assessment advocates whose child was to be left to her secret and poetic world (van Manen & Levering, 1996). Of course I am talking quite ideologically here. To keep the ideology going I will suggest we live in a measureless universe and busy ourselves with the instruments that create time and space so that we might continue to measure the measureless time and space of our world. And we love this measuring for its purpose is beyond our reason. The metre of our lives is the love of the counting of the rhythm of life that is evident in the magic and wonder about the world within each child's story, and so this is not so far-fetched to think of a love of metrics as creative and poetic. Through telling a child's story we are learning about metre in ways that evidence the play of poetics. The poetics is in the dwelling of the child who is yet to be anxious about the count but at all moments measuring the world, free of the paraphernalia of the metricocracy.

So this is the kind of measurement that we are talking about: a measurement that looks not for the number of publications and the scores of student satisfaction but rather to the poetic metrics that are the different possibilities of our writing and our teaching. This kind of tension is not new to us. In the not so popular and certainly criticised play *Measure for Measure* Shakespeare reminds of us of what can happen when our metric abandons life for Life, poetry for science, and dwelling for reason. We are presented with our absurd anxiety for the future Shakespeare warns against the kind of enumeration of the world that leaves behind the measure-taking which is dwelling (Peters, 2005). Ako Aotearoa have seen this in their impact metrics wherein researchers tell the story of their work (surely another research output, another score!). Learning and research stories provide evidence of the rhythm of what we research and teach. Revolutions like this are hard to maintain, they take a lot of breath, but the intent and the techniques are there and worth investing in now to consider how, for instance, academics can take the poetics of early childhood education into the metrics of their work.

A love of metrics can then be a making available. Academic suicide is not the answer. The metrics of academia reveal that there is no great meaning to our work, and so we get busy with our work because it is our work that is our freedom and our love. In this sense even our sad academic metrics keep our thinking busy, providing a pace to life, an "indifference to the future and a desire to use up everything that is given" (Camus, 1991, p. 60). There are those who hope their metrics mean something and there are those who do not, and those who do not actively accept the measurement. The absurd academic is more productive because their condition requires this. They must get on with as much teaching and writing for as long as possible – and none of it for the inevitable score – because we love these things without ever having to know what this love is or what this lover does for us. The data that is provided for us means nothing. What do we make of this love then? We know that "looking for an order or a logic is necessarily to no avail" (Brackman, 2009, p. 3). We know that our sponsorship has been withdrawn:

When Time withdraws his sponsorship

Time,

is a limiting, inhibitive, sponsor man  
of greed, hunger, one-eyed  
telescope and key-hole peeping–  
armed with a foreclosure on your life.

When he

withdraws sponsorship of all  
these personal implicitly complicit complexities  
of the truth of what is  
really and objectively–  
as against subjectively–there–*stop!*  
Put your trust in your gods  
no longer. The breath of life has  
abandoned you–and you are  
crossed, eye-to-eye, dead;  
cross-eyed-to-eyed dead...Ooooo!  
diddly-eye, dyed-in-the-wool dead.

(Tuwhare, 2011, p. 291)

Or:

The only thought to liberate the mind is that which leaves it alone, certain of its limits and of its impending end (Camus, 1991, p. 116).

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