

5-1998

Words From the Journey

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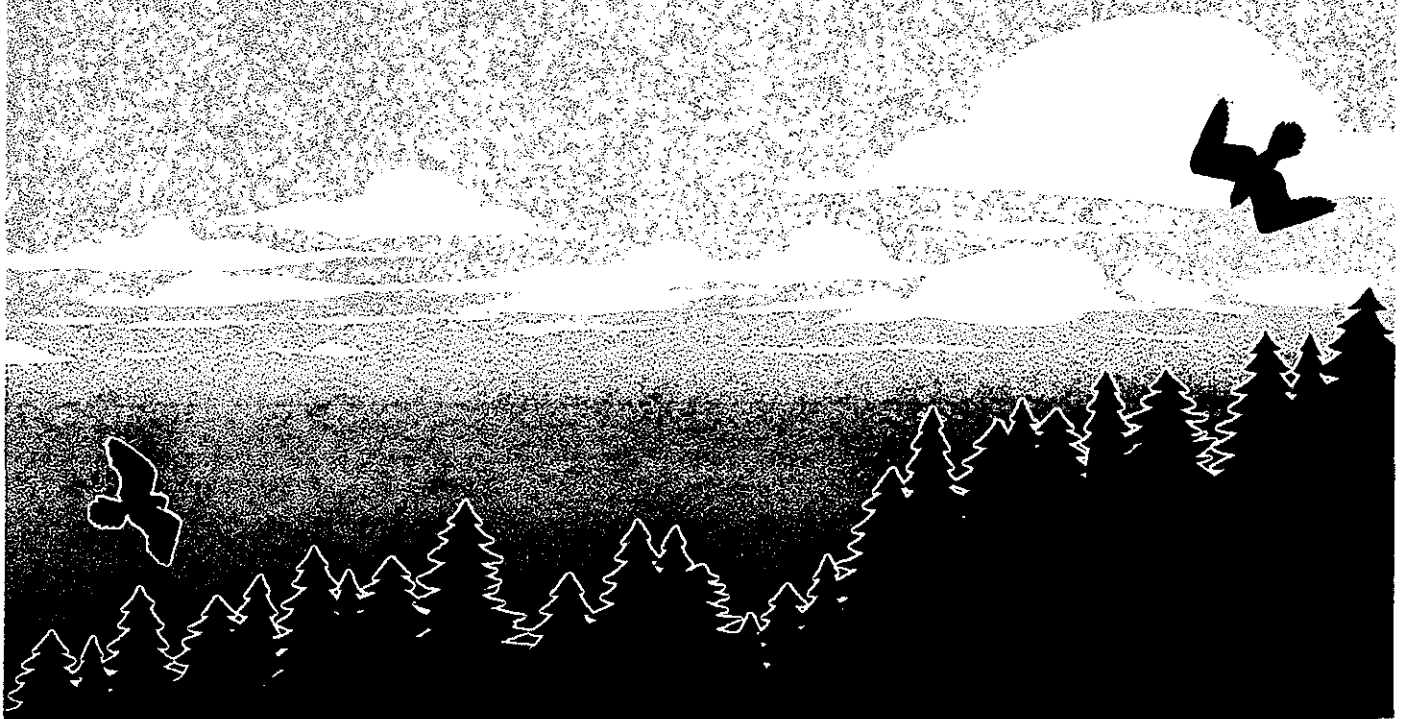
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Words From the Journey



University Honor's Thesis

Melvin D. Bower, Jr.
B.S. Speech Communication
1998



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May 1998

Spring, 1998

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
University Honor's Degree

Thesis Director: Dr. Mary Hinchcliff-Pelias

Acknowledgments

I've always believed that we're as strong as those who support us. I can't possibly list all of those who have individually made an impact upon my life, but I do thank each one of you for who you are and your love. I do have to thank my advisor, Mary, who made this project a genuine joy and a terrific experience. Above all I thank God for gifts undeserved, love unexplainable, and all of the experiences which make life so meaningful.



Dedication

Dedicated to my friends, without you the journey wouldn't be worth it!



What is Learning?

Fall down seven times, get up eight...
-Chinese Proverb

What is learning? While taking an honor's seminar my sophomore year on the culture of France, I can remember studying at great length to memorize the royal history. At the time I of course pondered the usefulness of knowing such arguably obscure information. I wished to persue a career within the field of Speech Communication and while I was fairly sure that not knowing the third king of France would not prohibit a possible job opportunity, I pressed on and memorized the royal lineage. Today, nearly two years later, I couldn't get past the second king, and thus as I reflect, I wonder, "did I learn anything?" The difficulty here surely lies within one's personal definition of learning. At the time of my exam I was able to write a well formed essay in which I chronicled the progression of royalty in France. At that moment I had indeed memorized who they were. As I struggle to define learning and as I study the opinions of others, I have come to the conclusion that in order for a definition of learning to be meaningful to me as I proceed upon the journey of life, it must be my own definition and one based upon experience and personal realization.

Initially, I wish to consider the idea of learning as a concept separate from experience. Operating under these constraints, a definition of learning would be limited to the retention of information or knowledge that is applicable to situations in order to establish understanding. In practical terms, this definition would state that simply memorizing facts without any idea how to apply them to actual problems or strategies would not constitute learning. I guess this answers the question about my experience with the French Royal Family.

Extending this definition further, information that is retained and remains available for reference but is not able to be applied to a given situation , problem, or challenge, has similarly not been learned. An example of this occurred to me when I decided, as a very young college student, that I would persue the glamorous world of accounting. I enrolled in my first economics class and was ready to do this crazy thing called accounting. At the end of the semester and to this day I remember nearly every piece of information that was presented from the professor and by the accompanying

texts. Did I learn anything? Applying the previous definition would yield an answer of, no. I still am unable to apply the concepts that I learned and thus from an academic standpoint I gained very little if anything at all. My professor seemed confused when I questioned his assertion regarding productivity. He had made the point in class that a society possessing more tractors than people was a great society because the possibility of productivity was at its very highest. I will concede that I am quite the humanitarian idealist, and I pointed out the futility of having more tractors seeing as how there was not enough people to operate them. We exchanged confused looks and went back to our unrelated mental worlds. Did I learn anything?

I have taken a number of courses on early childhood development and the majority of educational theories and philosophies deal with learning in terms similar to those in which I believe. Somewhere along the educational path however this concept is abandoned in the name of memorizing preambles and state capitals. I won't argue against the importance of knowing such information. These items are indeed beneficial, but I do wonder, however why they replaced such childhood experiential learnings as finger painting and sand boxes. Am I proposing that eighth graders be put in the sand box with a piece of construction paper? Certainly not, but one must wonder when experience was taken out of the educational equation.

The concept of college itself is one that introduces the question of learning. When asked why one is pursuing education, many will at some point in their explanation use the word learning and I have to wonder about their intentions when they use the term. As I was entering SIU at the tender age of 17, I am sure that one of my goals was surely to learn something. However, I must admit that I believe that I was applying a rather trite definition of learning; one that I have since come to reject. I probably thought that I had four years of memorizing questionably useful information waiting before me. How glad I am that much more was to be learned along the way. My experiences with classes that really did not seek to expand my mental capabilities were not completely in vain, however. I believe that courses that were taught

implementing a rather narrow definition of learning actually helped me to appreciate opportunities for genuine learning and to take advantage of courses that facilitated genuine learning effectively.

Okay, so what is genuine learning? When I was in 5th grade the school that I attended had an artist in residence who taught art to my class twice a week. One project that she taught involved the making of baskets. We soaked the branches and then developed our own pattern for forming the body of the basket. I still remember this experience vividly and am fairly confident that given adequate materials I could still compose a basket based on the lesson of my art teacher of many years ago. Did I genuinely learn how to make a basket? I would argue that I did because I not only remember the process but I also remember the application of the process. If I could only recall the materials used but was uncertain of exactly what to do with them, I would have simply learned about the activity instead of learning the activity itself.

The concept of basket-making may seem inapplicable to college learning, but I feel that it sheds light onto common educational practices. I have taken a majority of classes that did not strive to teach me the process or the means, but rather the ends alone. This is a somewhat common practice in education and it misses the point. While I was coaching speech at Carbondale Community High School I taught various events with a limited preparation time. In these events it is essential that a student attains understanding of the finished product as early as possible. When I first began coaching I would seek to explain the events by showing an example of the finished product, usually the state champion from the previous year. I quickly realized that this left students very confused and very intimidated. They soon began to worry that the example that I had shown them was my immediate expectation of them. I have since adapted my coaching style and refuse to show a student an accepted example until I feel they have a thorough understanding of the event as well as their own progress and approach in that event. I have discovered that this allows for learning to happen. When a student is presented with an answer and then the question is asked, they have not

truly learned- they have memorized an expected outcome. It is only when students have an opportunity to explore and discover the answer for themselves that they truly are able to learn.

In high school I took an American Government course that covered many aspects of modern political procedure and civil justice. I thoroughly enjoyed this class because the teacher would never admit any allegiance to a particular political party and presented the information in such a captivating and engaging format that learning was assured. We were not simply given answers to the questions, but rather, we had to research, discover, and ponder what we considered to be legitimate answers to the political challenges that were presented. Given this extremely positive experience, I was particularly disappointed when the instructor presented us with a fill-in-the blank study guide for our constitution test and instructed us to go home and memorize it for an exam to be given at the end of the week. The study guide appeared to have 500 items on it, simply because the information had been supplied. The teacher had given the answer and the questions were to follow at the end of the week. I found this to be a great discrepancy in his teaching style. He had always presented the question and then given us the opportunity to discover the answer. My response to this was a devaluated opinion of the Constitution of the United States. I felt that such information must not be of the great importance that I had always thought. Surely information that was of great value and importance would be presented in a way that allowed for appreciation and understanding. We had simply been asked to memorize. I have naturally re-assessed my views on the constitution and actually took a political science class once I arrived in college so that I could spend more time on the document that in some form, affects the majority of things that happen in the United States.

The importance with which an instructor presents a subject surely influences that student's appreciation and learning. However, unless a student is dedicated to learning a particular subject, the teacher's attitude makes little difference. That is the key to learning. So often teachers approach education with a sense of, "I must make

this material interesting so that student's will learn." This makes an incorrect assumption that students already possess a willingness to learn. If an educator is truly interested in a student learning a given material, the focus should shift from content to attitude. If a student has a motivation to learn, it will matter less how the information is presented. One clear example of this is found in nearly all modern American high schools within driver's training. You rarely, if ever, witness a student commenting on the dry lecture style or unimportant fact presentation by an instructor. In this example the student's desire to learn far exceeds the format in which the material is presented. Carrying this belief a step further would suggest that if an instructor truly wished to be effective, they would focus on the attitude with which their students learn as opposed to an entertaining lecture on the exciting features of algorithms.

I have had many experiences in which I was very interested in learning the given material and overlooked the short-comings of an ineffective instructor. The inverse however is also just as true. I have also had classes that were taught by masters in the field and that were presented with great fervor and excitement. My lack of interest in learning the given material allowed me to overlook the dynamic teaching styles of some incredible instructors simply because I had no desire to learn about the material in question.

The question then becomes one of motivation. How can a student be motivated to have interest in a subject that the student finds completely uninteresting and irrelevant to the educational and learning goals that s/he has set? The answer lies in effective foreshadowing. If an instructor can justify the importance of a certain discipline in a way that is convincing and applicable to a student, the stage will be set for a genuine learning experience.

When I was taking a course in forestry I struggled with applying the information that was presented to my career and educational goals. The traditional motivation regarding grades and scholastic records will only take a student so far, and then one learns tricks of the trade for memorizing and cramming in order to achieve

the almighty "A." However, as was mentioned earlier grades and memorization have little to do with learning. As I sat through the bi-weekly lecture on such subjects as crown fires and stream erosion I struggled for ways to apply this information to my own interests and circumstances. I soon realized with the help of my insightful T.A., "Joe," that nearly everything that was being presented was applicable to my goals and aspirations in a variety of ways. If I ever found myself within a corporate setting it would be imperative that I understand the effect of persons upon the earth. The impact upon the environment is certainly not a topic that will disappear. Additionally, I came to realize that inevitably human beings are responsible and integral in the role of natural processes and that I had a humanitarian responsibility to learn more about my world. Granted, this particular course was easier to translate into real terms, but as soon as I could see the value of learning the information, my appreciation for the course, and yes, my academic performance, increased greatly.

I have taken other courses that did not translate as easily into my view of an ideal and one hundred percent relevant learning experience, but I have learned that there is value in nearly every area of knowledge. The secret is to realize and apply the relevance to each individual person. As educators continue to wonder how to improve the level of learning and understanding, they need to pay closer attention to motivation and legitimate incentives for learning. If someone is convinced that there is value, either intrinsic or extrinsic, within a particular area, their increase in motivation will allow for improved levels of learning.

When I first began college I was undecided on a particular field of study and thus I was not highly motivated to excel in regards to learning. I maintained a high academic standard because that did speak to one of my goals; to do my best academically. However, my level of learning was not at its highest. I was bombarded my first two semesters with a plethora of required courses that ran the spectrum in regards to content. The courses that I enjoyed the most and feel as though I gained the

most from, were those that I saw as somehow relevant to my overall college experience. Or, those I saw as a direct preparatory for my goals within the "real world." As long as I was able to see a benefit, my learning level remained quite high.

As a freshman I took a Philosophy course that covered a wide variety of philosophical questions such as religion, humanity, abortion, capital punishment, etc. While the actual discipline of philosophy has little relevance to my educational and career goals, the material that was presented was directly relevant to my own situation. The instructor did an excellent job of persuading the class that the information that we were going to discuss throughout the semester was relevant to each and every individual that had plans of remaining a human being on the planet Earth. Her premise was simply that if one was going to be a legitimate member of society, the topics covered in her course required a certain level of understanding and comprehension. This motivated me to take her course seriously and learn a great deal. I never contemplated changing my major to Philosophy, but I gained a wealth of knowledge from the course because I was convinced that the information was going to prove beneficial to me in some form. The problem as I see it with learning is that many people fail to find motivating forces within the areas of study they pursue. Now, with nearly four years of college behind me I am able to realize and decipher motivation from nearly all aspects of my education both in and out of the class room. Perhaps this is the most important learning that can take place during the college experience.

If individuals can gain the knowledge and discernment necessary in order to motivate learning in a variety of experiences, perhaps the college years would not prove to be such a struggle for so many. As a freshman I would have had difficulty motivating myself to find value and importance within a course that dealt specifically with conceptual math as opposed to "legitimate" forms of arithmetic. In fact, I actually deferred a course in conceptual math until my senior year because I could not find the necessary motivation. As a senior I took the course because I had realized that there was value in learning the information that was presented in this class. Not only would

successful completion of this course take me one step closer to graduation, but it would also enable me to test the conceptual capacities of my learning schemas. While the majority of examples and specific cases were not applicable to my own areas of interest, the overall concepts of the course were relevant to questions I had regarding mathematical processes. By finding effective motivation, I was able to learn in a way not possible three years before.

The concept of learning is one that has been debated for centuries and the answers to the complex questions that surround this area of educational pondering are not likely to be answered to the satisfaction of everyone. My own experimentation and endeavors into the academic world of higher education have allowed me to evaluate learning in a new way, developing my own definition and realizing the role of motivation within learning. My life examples are not likely to be identical to those of many, but there are some consistent themes throughout the questions of learning. Simply stated, learning must be defined by the individual if it is indeed to have any value at all. My own evaluation of someone else's learning is only beneficial in my own experiences and insights, but does little for the evaluated individual. Learning is individual, specialized, and as our discussion will eventually show, inevitable.



What is Experience?

The joy of victory is known through
the experience of defeat...

(MDB)

What is experience? It seems as though we always speak of experience in terms of "firsts." Whether the discussion is about initial thoughts, first time experiences, or first time mistakes, there seems to be some need to start from the beginning. My first day of formalized education would have been my first day of Kindergarten, a day I remember only through the repetition of family stories and pictures of the event. In contrast, my first day of college is one that I remember quite well. It was June in Carbondale and about 125 degrees by my conservative estimates. The humidity left a cloud of fog over the land and even the ducks on campus lake looked thirsty. I was initiated into SIU with the time honored tradition known as the "Woody Hall Shuffle." I don't remember the specifics of this experience, just my feelings of frustration, confusion, and utter cluelessness. As the first summer semester progressed, the campus became more familiar, as did the people in my classes. It was during this first summer that I began to contemplate the role of experience in my college years. What would signify the ideal college experience?

I'm not one who believes that the answer to this question can be the same for even two individuals, so I sought my own answers, wherever they might lead. During the fall of 1994 I was a 17 year old freshman who was desperately seeking some sense of direction. There seemed to be 23,000 other students who knew exactly where they were going. I have since come to realize that these seemingly well-directed students were no more on task than I was; they simply knew how to hide it. Was this the key? Is the college experience about phony public relations? This was something I couldn't accept.

My first semester was a well rounded liberal arts lineup, from Philosophy to Politics with some Symphony thrown in for good measure. My first semester I dedicated myself faithfully to my academic pursuits. At the end of my first semester I had managed to retain my 4.0 GPA and be in line for all sorts of honors. I had to question, however, if this was what it was all about. Was I having the experience that people spend the rest of their lives reminiscing about? Surely not. As I reflected on my initial SIU experiences, it

became clear that I was betraying my true personality for the sake of academic success. I had spent little to no time socializing, which was extremely difficult for someone as extroverted as myself. It became clear that I needed to punctuate the lessons that I had learned with some good old fashioned experience. The spring semester of my freshman year I decided that staying within my strong suit of liberal arts was not going to teach me about all the things that interested me. It was during this time of great uncertainty that I began to investigate the possibility of becoming an Accountant. I'm not exactly sure why this seemed like a logical choice, but at the time it made sense. It was during this semester that I began to broaden my experience in hopes of gaining some great insight.

I began by feeding my natural urge to interact with people on a frequent basis. It was during this time that I began to solidify some friendships. I was amazed at how much these experiences were affecting the journey. Suddenly I had a wide array of experience from which to draw information. Many of my friends from high school had chosen different colleges and it was nice experiencing a healthy interaction with people. What I quickly realized was how much experience could frame the decisions that you make as well as your reactions to past decisions. The summer after my freshman year I went on my first college road trip and sought to experience some of this "real life" stuff I had heard so much about. I think that the majority of psychology and sociology classes should require a field trip in which individuals are randomly assigned with partners and told to get in a car and drive for a week, and then come home. I think this single activity could teach a majority of lessons that a textbook could never cover. Besides the more scholarly themes of human interaction and social psychology, one could learn the simple truth that if there are two girls in bikinis, you shouldn't compliment only one of them.

Our summer adventures took us through seven states and about 83 different mood swings. Despite the arguably immature hijinx of some college students on a beach, there were some important realizations that began to occur to me. The information that was

being fed to me on a daily basis did really have some application value. I was a bit taken aback at this startling realization that my educational experiences could actually be worth something. While we were driving through Alabama we had a surprisingly poignant discussion on the discrimination of the 1960's and the importance of the civil rights movement. Not until I drove on the highways of Montgomery and Birmingham did I truly feel the energy of the civil rights movement. These were real people who fought the battle of their lives. Being in these places where so much had happened brought life to the textbook photographs and lecture notes. I remembered the voice of my Government professor, the late Dr. David Derge, as he recounted the incredible tales of progress and sacrifice that had occurred in these southern cities. In that moment, that which I already knew, became something I had learned.

My sophomore year was a rough time as I felt increasing pressure to choose a major and stick with it. The problem I was having was that the classes I had taken did not speak to my experience or interests. It was in August of this year that my former speech coach called to inquire about my college experience and my current direction. She was also interested in finding out whether or not I would be willing to do a little coaching in my spare time. Competitive speech was one of the few things that had always made sense, and which I had always enjoyed. I energetically accepted her offer and re-entered this pseudo world of professionalism and sophisticated talk. I was thankful to be devoting my time to an activity that was real again. I found it a pleasant compliment to my world of books and lectures.

Soon after I began coaching competitive speech it became clear that this was an area that I needed to pursue. I had declared Political Science as a major, but I found myself reading speech critiques and formulating coaching strategies during lectures. This didn't make sense to me at the time, and I viewed myself as being somewhat un-focused. In retrospect, however, the answer to this situation becomes quite clear. Speech was

offering me experiences whereas Political Science was confined to lecture halls and mountains of reading. I soon declared Speech as my major and ran with it. I felt like a hyperactive kid in a playground after making this choice. Was it possible to enjoy your area of study and be excited by your degree program? Apparently so.

Content with a major and direction for my college years, I continued to seek out more of these "college experiences" that were somehow supposed to be defining my four years at Southern. During fall break 1995, my best friend and I were presented with an opportunity to travel to Boston for a long weekend. Knowing it was a 20 hour drive, we hesitated for a few brief moments and then threw our bags in the car. We were quite pleased with the direction of our fall break as we pulled out of Carbondale at 5:00 on a Wednesday evening. Most of our friends were either staying in town, or going home. We were venturing forth into an unknown experience.

Our time in Boston was incredible and despite our wealth of truly tourist-worthy pursuits, it was the impetus behind our trip that we best remember. In college the theme is preparation. Every class is supposedly preparing you in some way for the "real world." It was during this trip that we realized that you learn about the real world by living in the real world. Viewing college as an artificial environment where one is removed from society only seeks to alienate one from the world in which they indeed reside. While in Boston we sought to make the most of our brief stay. Dining one night at a legendary Boston restaurant that normally boasts a plethora of east coast celebrities, my friend and I began having a discussion about our futures and where we felt they would lead us. My friend was studying law and expressed her concern that she would be limited in her clientele given the area in which she wished to live. She had a keen desire in remaining in the Carbondale area, and she knew that making such a choice would certainly not be the fast track to the Supreme Court or widely publicized trials. However, none of these glittering attributes to legal success appealed to her in the least. When she inquired into my future, I said that I

simply hoped to make a difference in the world, in whatever way I could. She went on about how she could see me in politics or playing host to the culturally elite. I told her that I wouldn't mind that for a weekend as long as Monday morning I could return to the world of helping others. She then made a comment that I will never forget, "I guess you don't learn much about entertaining the president eating at McDonald's everyday." This idea, I thought, possessed such great wisdom. If someone has a career goal, they can't simply wait around for the day when that endeavor will begin. If a pursuit is truly important, it's worthy of adequate preparation.

If I wished to pursue a career that would help people I probably shouldn't devote myself to selfish interests that left no time for interaction with people. Experience is the greatest single preparation that we have for life. It is truly sad that too many professors fail to realize this. One of the most beneficial learning experiences that I encountered was a speech class in small group communication. In this class we were divided up into work groups to perform a variety of tasks. The final project of this class was a group presentation recorded on video in which we all had to work together to present a message about relevant communication in small groups. This class was an incredible experience because we are all inevitably members of groups and if we are to succeed we have to work with other people. Certainly the accompanying texts of this course were beneficial, but the actual group interaction comprised the true merits of this educational experience.

Similarly, classes that are largely participation based are usually referred to as less scholarly in academic circles. However, it's while students take a theater class or are involved with the symphony that life becomes real. It should be of little surprise to most administrators that the majority of students do not refer to college as the real world. Every academic lesson is set up to re-enforce this message. "It's important to do well in your classes because they will help you in the real world," is a common banner of many professors. I thought I was living in the real world right now, despite the fact that little of

my education has been centered around that message. I can remember in high school there were a group of students that only attended classes in the morning and then they assumed a job in the afternoon. I used to think this was a fairly decent waste of time. After all, isn't it inside the classroom that learning really occurs? Yes and no. I quickly learned when I applied for my first job that listing no relevant experience was not exactly the fast track to promotion or glamorous employment. Perhaps those in high school were learning lessons that I would not learn until years later. Lessons about work situations and interaction with others. What is the benefit of an expensive education and perfect GPA if you are unable to survive in a work environment? There comes a time when the rubber has to meet the road.

As I reflect upon the overall value of my education, I must take a critical look at those classes with 300 other individuals all struggling to copy notes off of an overhead projector. I'm not saying there wasn't genuine value in the material presented, but when I think about what I gleaned from such courses in comparison to the aforementioned small group class, I have to wonder if large lectures are really an acceptable mode of education. I was fortunate in only having a couple of these large lecture format nightmares, but I know through those experiences that there is little to no relationship formed with a professor, and the degree of instructor concern is arguably non-existent. Classes that offer a component of experience, however, are certainly offering skills that are extremely difficult to duplicate in textbooks and lecture notes.

Many areas of study require that an internship be completed before a degree can be earned. This is an intelligent approach to education. While there are certainly many things that can be more easily learned in the classroom, there are some lessons that don't translate well to a row of desks. An active and well-developed intern or extern program can help grant experience, the great stabilizer of knowledge. While a person is in a work environment, they are able to experience more than just the concepts that were taught.

They are also able to experience the inner workings of a particular field. Internships are required of all medical related fields. Surely we wouldn't let these young professionals near our bodies without adequate training. My roommate is a mortuary science major, and he is required to complete an internship and an apprenticeship. I believe that other majors that do not require such work experience are sending a subtle message to their students that such fields are not as important.

This concept does not apply to each and every field. If someone is pursuing a degree in interpersonal their whole existence is an internship of sorts. Experience allows one to understand and to learn. Modern educational systems and models seem to be moving away from practical experience. Many colleges used to tout internship programs and job placement. These days the emphasis is on improved instruction, not the availability of experience.

When this thesis was originally assigned, I did not understand why it could not be written early. As someone who prides himself at his attempts to proactive behavior, waiting until the final semester of my senior year seemed a dangerous proposal. In retrospect, it seems clear that you can't really comment on the completeness of the college experience during the summer of the sophomore year. Now that I have nearly completed my education, a part of me wishes that this reflection of learning and experience could wait until the process has been completely completed. I believe that each and every set of experiences have taught me valuable lessons, and as I examine the remainder of my college experience, there seems to be a variety of uncharted water left ahead. I wonder what I will discern from my last set of final exams as an undergraduate. Will I go to all of them? Will my grades be up in the air, or will I finish the way I started, with straight A's? And what will it be like when I walk out from my last exam as an undergraduate? Will I be sad, unbelievably happy? And the whole concept of graduation is a mystery of experience as well. With the day that I have been so anxious for approaching every day, I wonder

what my thoughts will be as I cross the stage and shake hands with the dean. Will I trip over my robe and fall down the steps? Will my favorite professor run down to give me a hug?

It's this mystery that will leave a certain element lacking from this completed project, but the same mystery that motivates and empowers me to continue on in this journey to see what is next along the trail. As my experiences unfold I find that life truly is an adventure if we choose to view it as such. As my path has led through Southern Illinois University I have been blessed with experiences unmeasurable. As the journey continues I can only cling to what I have experiences to shine the light on that which is to come. It is this process of experience that makes sense out of our dark directions. Nothing but the step we're currently taking is assured. Tomorrow is a promise, yesterday a memory - we've all read that phrase on refrigerator magnets everywhere - but there is truth to be gleaned. Living life with a feeling of assurance and certainty in regards to material and physical things is somewhat risky. In life, not only are few things certain, but even fewer things are as we expected.

Throughout the journey that I have been privileged to take, the lessons and the knowledge that I have attained have been based upon that which I have been able to experience. As I contemplate the future of my education, I am sure that for the moment I want to take an opportunity to experience life away from the classroom. Just as experience has been the great qualifier for the knowledge I have been taught in the classroom, I am curious now to see what lessons will be punctuated by my experiences in the future, away from the classroom. Will my former lessons follow me and continue to have new meaning, or will I learn new lessons that exist outside of rows of chairs and lecture notes. Time will tell, and I'll be asking....



Learning and Experience

"Wherever you go, there you are!"

-Suzzane Sugarbaker

Learning and Experience Our journey thus far has taken us through the specifics of learning and experience, and a variety of the examples that have been personal to my experience. This journey is only beneficial if it leads us to a meaningful conclusion. It should be clear by this point that learning and experience cannot independently exist. In my examples of learning situations, there was always a correlating experience. Similarly, my experiences have always been punctuated by lessons learned. So what's the point of this lengthy discussion that has chronicled my path through higher education? The answer lies within approach and the lesson that can be learned with the cooperation of experience.

In 1995 I had the privilege of working at the United Nations during the 50th anniversary celebration. During my stay in New York I had the honor of hearing addresses from diplomats from around the world. It is likely that most people have heard at least a snippet of a diplomatic address while surfing the channels past CNN or C-Span. I certainly have heard my share of brief moments of international discourse and like many others, continued on through the cable line-up. What made my personal experience any different? The experience of having witnessed the event as it was occurring. When someone is listening to a TV broadcast they are having an experience through that interaction, but the gleaned experience is not of the same level of significance as a personal viewing. Because the experience is altered, so is the learning.

I always wondered why English teachers insisted that we act out certain scenes of a play that we were reading. Even though this surely consumed more time than a quick read through- the experience of embodying a character or situation allows for a deeper level of learning. Perhaps this also speaks to why certain academic subjects are not as widely understood as others. It is fairly common for a majority of people to let out a collective sigh when the topic of math comes around. The reason is that the majority of people are not successful in math and do only the minimum amount that is required to

attain requirements or minimal standards. I myself view math much the same way as the majority of individuals. I put off my college math experience until the last possible moment. My view of math however hasn't always been so negative.

My second grade teacher, Mrs. Lindsey, taught math interactively! We had to wear sandwich boards to solve problems and there were always these neat stories to illustrate mathematical concepts. I can remember wanting to be a math teacher when I was in second grade. I of course let go of this unrealistic and ill-suited career choice when I realized that perhaps math wasn't as much fun as my teacher had made it appear. My later lessons in advanced algebra neglected a sandwich story board narrative to illustrate algorithms. And yes, it was at this point that I lost interest. But, the memories of that experience remain with me nearly fifteen years later. Her approach was perfect- treating math like any other subject did not allow for negative framing. How often have math teachers themselves conceded that math is perhaps not the most loved subject. Presentation of the experience is as important as the experience itself, but that's someone else's thesis.

Understanding the relationship between learning and experience can only be beneficial if a greater lesson can be extracted. I have learned through my college experience that you have to take some personal responsibility for your own learning. If the subject you are studying is not making sense, or if you are having difficulty assigning some tangible meaning, then there is a personal responsibility to seek out clarifying experiences. During my junior year I began taking speech classes that dealt with organizational communication and business situations. I had personally never had much experience in the business world and thus I decided to seek employment in a business related area. I was led to the wonderful world of retail sales. While selling men's suits I was somehow learning more about organizational communication and interpersonal communication framed in the context of the business world. At this point in my life I am not at all sure that I have

any interest in pursuing organizational business culture, but the experiences that I sought have greatly helped to give meaning to my classroom teachings. Again, experience has transformed knowledge into learning. Without my personal application I would not have been able to fully understand and *learn* what was being taught in the classroom.

There is an added benefit to seeking experiences to clarify knowledge presented in a classroom setting. By having some knowledge base about a certain area it is possible to refute the sometimes ill informed instruction of a particular professor. It has always been said that knowledge is power, but I would argue that experience is power in that experience provides learning from knowledge. Without experience, information in a textbook will never come off the page and become useful information.

I fully believe that there should be a requirement of experience before one graduates. This experience should be specific to the chosen academic major. For example, if someone is pursuing a degree in Public Relations s/he should find themselves in a real world work situation so an honest decision about career choice can be reached. This experience should also not come during the last semester. At that point, it's often too late to choose another path. It would seem that academic departments that truly care about student well-being should be accessible and encouraging to students seeking outside experiences. It is these experiences that can prevent major mistakes. It is often not possible to determine the specifics of an academic area within a classroom. My sister worked in an advisement office during her undergraduate years and she was shocked at how many people would graduate with a degree having spent no actual time in the field. Often times, students would return to college in search of a degree that was more applicable to their interests. Maybe students should take responsibility for these real life explorations themselves, but it would seem logical that faculty members would be accessible for recommendations and professional connections.

My own college experiences that have taken place outside of the classroom have

taken me to Atlanta, Birmingham, Boston, Chicago, Indianapolis, Louisville, Memphis, Montgomery, Nashville, New York, New Orleans, Panama City, Savannah, Washington D.C., and all points in between. Granted, not all of these adventures began as academic pursuits, but learning is inescapable through experience. And that is really what the point of this discussion has been, to show that learning must be accentuated, punctuated, and applied with experience.

I often wonder how my college experience has compared with others. Have those who spent most of their time sitting in a dorm room or in a car traveling home every weekend gained my insights and learning? Certainly they have learned something through the experiences they have chosen. And if knowledge of trashy talk shows was a more valuable commodity, perhaps I would envy their experience. In retrospect, learning through experience is inevitable. Similar to a foundation of communication that states that one cannot not communicate, it is similarly true that one cannot not experience. It is through these experiences that learning takes place. My own journey was not at all what I had in mind when I first started SIU four years ago, but I wouldn't trade even one experience because each individual experience has affected what I have learned. I would not be comfortable taking a risk at losing even one thing that I have learned because it has helped to comprise who I am today. For better or worse the choices I have made influence the experiences and learning that I have collected on the paths I have trod. I am not someone who believes in the benefit of regret. I believe that we are called to certain paths of certain journeys for particular reasons. It may not be evident at the moment what the exact usefulness of a particular experience will one day be, but I believe in dedication to completion. The end of the journey may not always come when we think it should, but the path along the way, this we choose for ourselves.