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Unit 1

Learning in society can take on multiple forms with various motivations, and most educators know that for true learning to take place, a student at any level must be invested in the experience. A student for the purposes of this essay is any person involved in a learning experience. The protagonist of the film *Erin Brockovich* is a good example of this non-traditional student with a strong investment in her learning experience. A particular set of circumstances and her persistence afforded her the opportunity to obtain the answers to her questions, affirming the idea that learning can happen outside of the school atmosphere.

Learning out of school is not a new concept, the benefits of being “street smart” versus “book smart” has been widely debated. The value current society places on the two types may differ; however, it is not disputed that learning can happen outside of a schooling environment and can have a meaningful impact on the student’s life. Lauren B. Resnick confirms this thought with the statement: “Popular wisdom holds that common sense outweighs school learning from getting along in the world -- that there exists a practical intelligence, different from school intelligence, that matters more in real life” (13). This practical intelligence that Resnick refers to is learned through challenging experiences outside of school. Brockovich learns many hard lessons throughout the film, including the necessity to follow her instinct. For Brockovich, the reassurance of this trait occurred at an unlikely age and in an unfamiliar environment.

The relevance and investment in the lawsuit promoted a successful learning experience. Brockovich had an emotional connection with the clients and families; these emotions furthered her motivation to learn in order to help those affected. In support of this connection between topic and understanding, Resnick explains, “Outside of school, because they are continually engaged with objects and situations that make sense to them, people do not fall into the trap of forgetting what their reasoning is about” (15). It only made sense for Brockovich to continue to pursue her instincts for the families; due to her single mother status Brockovich knew what it was like to struggle, and the reasoning for her actions was never in doubt.

Throughout the stages of her learning process, Brockovich’s motivation rarely waned. Granted there were frustrations and at times she felt defeated, but she never truly gave up. This is a very important component of the learning society, the desire to compete and succeed in the face of adversity. Thomas Friedman reiterates the importance of competition with the statement: “we must be ready to compete, and get every individual to think about how he or she can upgrade his or her educational skills” (*The World is Flat*, pp. 339-340). Brockovich not only meets the competition element of this statement, but the entire story would’ve never occurred had she not wanted to better her life and obtain a new career.

Learning happens in the most unlikely places, and during times of challenge. Brockovich’s story is one of challenges and triumph. When hard decisions need to be made, and obstacles are encountered, learning on various levels occurs. Usually this is unconscious learning and until the learner or observer reflects upon the experience the learning can go unnoticed. Reflection upon these experiences provides for more learning opportunities as well.