

“Learning the Learning Society Through *Erin Brockovich*”

While much can be said about the concept of a learning society, most educators seem to agree on one key factor – learning does not have to only revolve around what is taught within the classroom. As a prime example of this view, the feisty Erin Brockovich takes center stage, and her work on the Hinkley case in the early 1990s throws aside many traditional preconceptions about how learning can develop. Indeed, while her journey through the eponymous film could fill pages about the learning society, three elements in particular stand out.

First, perhaps one of the more central themes of *Erin Brockovich* is the extent to which “unstructured learning” had a profound effect on Brockovich’s life. As highlighted in Unit 2.4, unstructured learning “refers to the unplanned experiences of everyday living from which we learn: in the workplace and careers, and in our private, family and community lives....” Though Brockovich had experienced forms of highly structured learning while growing up, it was in her workplace that she had a chance to flourish. One might argue that she was simply in the right place at the right time, but the more honest answer is that Brockovich *took advantage of* the opportunities presented to her in that right place and right time. Despite not having any prior experience in her chosen field, she demonstrated a willingness to learn and, of her own resolve, threw herself into mastering aspects of real estate, tort law, and chemical poisons, all of which took place in an unstructured learning environment. In this, she took on the “permanent capacity change” as discussed by Knud Illeris in his “Workplace Learning and Learning Theory” and proved his point that adults “learn what they want to learn and what is meaningful for them to learn,” whether they are in a university setting or not (4, 7).

Next, *Erin Brockovich* vividly elaborates on the idea that a learning society must be a collaborative effort. This concept echoes the research of Lauren Resnick, who noted that “schooling focuses on the individual’s performance, whereas out-of-school mental work is often socially shared” (2.2). Brockovich modeled this belief throughout the film as she shared her “mental work” for the Hinkley case with the plaintiffs, Ed Masry, and somewhat unwillingly with lawyers at a larger firm. In addition, she also recognized the support she received in her personal life from her boyfriend George. For example, at the film’s conclusion, she shows George what “he helped to do” by taking him to visit a woman affected by PG&E’s recklessness, a tacit acknowledgement that her successes could not have happened without his willingness to watch over her children while she worked on the case.

Erin Brockovich also illustrates the very important fact that learning is a *process*, an idea presented in Richard Sennet’s *The Craftsman*. Throughout her five year journey on the Hinkley case, she experienced trials and errors, but she was given the freedom to adapt, develop, and learn throughout it. In the midst of this process, Masry tells her to not take their work personally, to which an angry Brockovich responds, “Not personal? That is my work, my sweat, my time away from my kids! If that’s not personal, I don’t know what is!” Here, she hits on a crucial point, for if learning is to be a genuine process, it must *become* personal, something beyond the brick and mortar of the classroom walls that permeates every aspect of the individual’s life.

In the end, Erin Brockovich has fulfilled Ya-Hai Su’s conviction that within the learning society, “it is up to individuals to express themselves by devising their own learning journey”

(15). In her five year journey with the Hinkley case, Brockovich accomplished this and more, devising her own learning journey while subtly inviting others to do the same.