

The Learning Style of Erin Brockovich

EAD 860 Concepts of a Learning Society

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While not evident on the surface, Erin Brockovich sure shows she has what it takes to succeed in the flat world. That is, during the movie, she shows evidence of having the qualities necessary to succeed in the new learning society as described by Thomas Friedman in his chapter *The Right Stuff, Tubas and Test Tubes*, from his book *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. Brockovich's innate gifts and her learning style can be explained by Friedman's Five: learning how to learn, knowing how to navigate, passion and curiosity, liberal education, and nurturing the right-brain.

When we meet Brockovich she is an unemployed single mom at the end of her rope. She dresses unprofessionally (to say it kindly) and has no formal credentials that would indicate she would make a successful paralegal. However, she is savvy enough to land a job at her lawyer's law firm as a filing clerk and proves to her boss that she has "the right stuff," as described by Friedman.

She exemplifies the idea of learning how to learn by immersing herself into the Hinkley case through her own curiosity. She read the documents carefully in order to learn her job and to also better understand the case. She's knows she is smart and does a bang up job as an investigator on chromium 6 use by PG&E in the community. She also uses her feminine wiles and street smarts to gather evidence for her case. She is an example of a "picks herself up by her bootstraps" kind of gal.

This period during the 1980's is prior to the internet revolution and though even now she admits she is not technically savvy, in her interview in the Conservation Law Foundation's *Conservation Matters* Newsletter (summer 2001, p. 6), Brockovich does make a case for operating a system of navigation that works for her. Being dyslexic, she formulated a strategy of using what she calls "hot-docs." She uses these binders of evidence in order to understand the material and the connections between them so she can find patterns and piece together the framework of her legal arguments.

Because of her unconventional entrance into the legal profession, Brockovich hasn't been conditioned to play by the rules. She's naïve enough to think you can beat the system and she has the passion and curiosity to succeed because of it. She proves she has moxie when she sneaks onto private property to take water samples. She shows even more moxie when she takes over the meeting with PG&E and tells the opposing counsel to take a hike after hearing their 20 million dollar settlement offer.

It is harder to conclude that Brockovich exhibits the critical lateral thinking skills one develops with a liberal education as described by Friedman. She admits in high school she was considered in need of special education and so her main goal was to win a beauty contest. She jumped into two failed marriages, had three children and didn't make time, or didn't have the resources to obtain a college education. She also doesn't describe any outside interests in the arts or other humanities. However, she is very interested in helping people. This interest will balance nicely with the analytical legal skills she has honed.

I think most paralegals need to have strong left-brain analytical skills in order to do their jobs, but exceptional paralegals also need a strong right-brain connection like Brockovich. Her intuition and highly developed interpersonal skills drew people to trust her motives. This in turn led other plaintiffs to seek her out which helped the law firm file a class action lawsuit against PG&E. Her bosses and her clients are rewarded for these efforts and in turn she is compensated well and earns their respect.

Last, while her interpersonal skills are very good, she does need to learn self-regulation as she often offends people with her crude communication style. If she is able to rein this in and continue to pursue her professional development in her craft then I do believe she will be exceptional in succeeding in this new flat world.