**English 100B**

**California State University Long Beach**

Final Essay: Role of Life Learning

A good chef cannot produce stunning dishes by just reading the cookbooks or learning the recipes at the training institutions. He has to fight with the ingredients a few times in the kitchen to improve his skills. Similarly, a mechanic learns about changing car tires in a trade school. However, knowing the steps does not make him a professional mechanic with decent skills. These two examples reveal one of the most basic but vital truths: formal education is not the isolating factor that makes up a person’s success.

Getting an education is not just about going to school, listening to lectures, reading books, passing tests, and earning degrees. In fact, education is a long-term process which can be obtained from different aspects of life at anywhere, anytime, and from anyone. There are many concepts that a person can only find and pick up through everyday experiences. Once people accept that fact, they will broaden their minds and will learn more efficiently. It is important to know that going to school is not the sole way to gain knowledge and become successful. Learning from real-life experiences can drastically change the way students are educated and transform the academic system to a higher level of quality. Therefore, education systems should make more room for students to incorporate theoretical learning in classes with hands-on experiences from outside of school.

Students are trying their best to study hard in school, hoping that someday they can change the world. Nevertheless, they hardly recognize that the world with real-life scenarios also affects how they learn. When talking about education, most people would define “lessons” as school lectures. Because of that misunderstanding, it is very easy for them to develop a false belief in their minds from an early age that school was the only approach to more knowledge. However, in the “Reconsiderations on the Concept of Lesson. School and Life Lessons”, Gabriel Albu states that:

The lesson is the situation in which we expand, deepen, enrich our life experience and, with it, life itself… Lessons are not (only) a framework for organizing and carrying out activities articulated by and oriented towards the achievement of formal-institutional objectives; instead, they are, I would say, education itself (199 - 201).

In other words, Albu explains that with a broad definition, lessons can be interpreted in different forms. Although institutions use lessons as a format to deliver information from teachers to students, lessons are certainly not limited within schools. In fact, people can obtain knowledge from life lessons that can be encountered at any time. If it is a lesson, it is considered a part of the education process. Even if it is a joyful or painful lesson, learners can still gain something from it and be able to benefit themselves and further their understanding. The broad concept of “lessons” expands the limit of human understanding and thus, leads to a variety of methods for teaching and learning. It provides people who are open with this definition more freedom, courage, and enthusiasm to explore new chapters, new adventures, and new worlds in their own ways without following the traditional format.

When Mary L. Pratt, who is a famous Canadian author and a professional culture expert, wrote her article “Arts of the Contact Zone,” she told stories about how her son, Sam and an indigenous Andean person named Guaman Poma, gained knowledge on their own. First of all, Pratt’s son was described as a young five-year-old boy that fell in love with baseball cards. He loved them so much that he had a huge collection of baseball cards, each of which had a name of a famous baseball player. By collecting those cards, Sam was able to learn and remember many players’ names as well as their personal information like their origins, their birthdays, their clubs, and so on. While finding and learning about baseball players’ information, Sam also had chances to learn about American history and geography, improve his arithmetic skills by calculating batting averages, and other useful skill sets such as arranging, comparing, trading, and understand the value of money. Moreover, Sam’s fondness for baseball cards soon developed into him playing this sport. With his passion and enthusiasm, Sam later become a great baseball player (512). So, 5-year-old Sam was able to achieve many skills before he would go to school. With a huge collection of information like this, the schools may not be able to teach it all, or if they do, it might take years to cover all of that. Guided by his interest, Sam learned and expanded his knowledge by himself. This is an outstanding example which demonstrates that education is not limited to any age and can be attained with or without the education system. Everyone can totally learn anything that they find interesting as long as they want to.

In the second story about Guaman Poma, he also managed to learn on his own. At the time, his people were dominated and tortured by the Spanish. Even though he only spoke his native language, Poma worked really hard to learn Spanish from his half-brother and created phenomenal work by himself. He wrote a powerful twelve-hundred-page letter to King Philip III of Spain using a mixture of Quechua and ungrammatical, expressive Spanish (Pratt 513). Through the letter, Poma represented his people to point out the similarities and contrasts between Andean and Spanish cultures. It not only revealed the contact zone of the two cultures but also criticized and denounced the Spanish’s cruel conquest. Guaman Poma did not receive any formal education or professional training. However, his incredible work, which was a twelve-hundred-page letter included eight hundred pages of written words and four hundred lines of pictures, evidently proves his intelligence and skill sets. It is a difficult work that not everyone can do, even people who go to school and receive formal training. Guaman Poma taught himself just by his need and own will. He knew how to use resources from his daily life, like his half-brother and the colonizers, and took advantage of them. By doing that, he was able to learn a new language and use his words as weapons to defend his people and his culture. With that being said, the examples of Pratt’s son learning from baseball cards and Guaman Poma learning Spanish in order to write a letter verify the idea mentioned by Albu that there is more than one way that everyone can learn. People can gain understanding without attending schools or receiving formal instructions, like both Pratt’s son and Poma expanded their knowledge by their amazing efforts. It proves that informal forms of learning can help people to gain more relevant knowledge than when they do in schools.

Exclusively focusing on formal learning is harmful for learners. People tend to concentrate only on what presented in front of them and will ignore other shining spots at the corner of their eyes. With this learning style, the learners usually pay so much attention to the knowledge they have received at school and try to get the most out of it that they miss out other opportunities to learn outside of the subject. Richard Rodriguez, a son to Mexican immigrants and later became a famous scholar and author, published an article called “The Achievement of Desire” to share his own experience with this issue. Rodriguez was a determined student. He was eager to get educated, get good grades, and tried really hard to be successful in academic life. But because of that, he denied his family background and pushed everyone away by moving far from his family. In his article “The Achievement of Desire”, he confessed that he was lonely. Rodriguez presents the struggle with finding the right balance between academic life and his own life. He is an example of students who lack life-experiences and cannot make a connection with the world around them. On his academic journey, he focused so much on getting good grades and becoming a successful and educated person that he missed out on many other important things such as his family relationships. Even though his parents were not highly educated, they were proficient workers who had abundant experiences from working their entire lives. If Rodriguez had chosen to keep a close relationship with his family, he could have learned so many more useful tips and knowledge from his parents’ wisdoms. Ultimately, Rodriguez failed to explore new ways to improve himself outside of the classroom.

The traditional education system guides students to focus on learning from classroom lectures and books, nevertheless, many people do not realize that learning from activities outside of school is also essential. Students need descriptive theories to analyze the problems, for the purpose of effectively applying them in real-life situations. Without the opportunity to experience life learning methods, a student would have to spend a long time questioning about the meaning of one’s education. At the end of his article, Rodriguez continues to ask himself: “Who, beside my dissertation director and a few faculty members, would ever read what I wrote? And: Was my dissertation much more than an act of social withdrawal?” (549). After years of being a committed, hard-working student, Rodriguez still could not find the purpose of all his effort. It is clear that schools did not provide him enough functional skills and real-life experiences which were supposed to help him understand the value of his knowledge. As he separated himself from his family and people around him, he lost chances to apply and practice what he learned to better the lives of those people. He was not engaged with the knowledge he learned at school and had no clue what to do with it later.

Rodriguez’s problem is, in reality, a common issue of many other students. After graduation, instead of going straight to college and continue their academic paths, a lot of high school students decide to have a break by taking a gap year to explore the world. The most common reason leading to this decision is because high school students are lacking experiences. Along their transformation from kindergarten to high schools, most of the time students spend on studying theoretical knowledge, but they barely have any chance to practice it in their lives. Thus, they start to lose their passions in learning and cannot figure out the purpose of lessons they receive at schools. Not having a real-life experience results in them not knowing what their interests are, what they like and do not like, or what they want to do in the future. Since they are not prepared for their next chapter in life and hesitate to move forward, they either stop go to school or take a break. By doing that, they not only waste their time, but also slow down their future plan. If they had a better preparation when they started their academic journey, it would greatly improve their careers.

On the contrary, students who practice informal learning have a higher chance of performing better in academic life. Life experience teaches students how to properly use the information acquired from school to benefit themselves. It gives students chances to reinforce their understanding and recognize the value of lifelong learning. In the academic system, a hybrid of formal learning and learning from life can be helpful to enhance the performance of students’ critical thinking skills. In the article “Student Perception in Homeland Security and Emergency Management Education: Experiential Learning Survey” written by Tiffany Danko, she summarizes a survey that was conducted by her with HSEM students in higher education levels about experiential learning. The result proves that students who participated in activities outside of school and have opportunities to practice their discipline achieved a high level of satisfaction (Danko 423). After the students came back from the activities which they took part in, obvious score boosts were presented. As experimental learning allowed them to interact with more people other than students and teachers, the participants indicated that they were able to make more connections with other experts in the field and become more adaptable with different situations**. Indeed, practicing informal learning along with formal learning at institutions really helps to lift up students’ confidence and prepare them well for their future careers. It is a solution for the problem that students like Rodriguez encounter. Those experiences are chances for students to test their abilities and strengthen their understanding before they graduate.** **Not every theory learned at schools are applicable in real life; Therefore, the transition from school to life is complicated. It is better for students to experience some problems beforehand and get the idea of what they are going to deal with in the future so that they are prepared carefully.**

Moreover, life learning can positively impact the development of students not only when they are in school but also when they get a job. In the article “Introduction to the Special Issue: An Update on Informal and Incidental Learning Theory” published by Victoria J. Marsick and Karen E. Watkins, the authors reexamine how adults practice informal and incidental learning. Marsick and Watkins believe that there are many natural opportunities for **learning** that occur every day in a person's working life. By contrasting formal training and instruction with informal learning, researchers conclude that informal and incidental learning are factors that mostly affect employees’ work performance. According to their survey, “approximately 80 percent of learning at workplace is informal” (Marsick & Watkins 11). When students graduate from schools and begin to work as employees, they no long improve their knowledge from books and classes like they used to. Instead, working offices and partners who they interact with every day become their main learning sources. Adults try their best to get used to the working environment and learn how to cooperate with their colleagues. All the unusual problems and daily incidents encountered at work are the triggers that motivate employees to explore and learn more. Informal learning in a corporate environment helps to bridge performance gaps and improve workplace efficiency.

In conclusion, learning from life experience plays a crucial part in the development of students not only when they are in school or when they are working but also at any time of their lives. Life experience helps students to have a stronger connection with the knowledge they receive at school and understand the practical value of it. And when students become employees, daily experience would be the main source of learning for them to master and expand their skill sets in the working environment. Therefore, an early preparation of life learning is necessary to determine the success of a person. A possible solution for this problem is that school systems should develop programs that blend in both formal and informal learning. Making the completion of these programs mandatory for graduation and including more field trips in formal classes would be efficient ideas to get students to be more involved in the subjects. The main purpose of it is to blur the boundaries that often exist in program design between formal and informal learning. The programs should be applied throughout the entire process from kindergarten to upper level of education so that students have more time to adapt and adjust themselves for it.

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