

Maximising the Tertiary Level Experience

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A student of a local tertiary institution recently commented that students feel that they are not prepared for the workplace upon completion of their undergraduate studies. The context in which the comment was made unfortunately did not allow for a satisfactory exploration of the merits and demerits of the point. I therefore hope that the following discussion will prove useful to students embarking on tertiary education in the near future.

It may be assumed that students who have gained entry to a tertiary institution already have a fair assessment of their potential. That assessment would have been guided, undoubtedly, by a core set of values and attitudes shaped by the individual's experiences, including those at home and school. Most students at tertiary level have a general idea of the type of career they envision for themselves. An important question they need to ask themselves is "why?" The answer to that question would help them to determine what their values are and, consequently, what their overall goals are.

Organisational psychology tells us that, at entry level, most professionals would find satisfaction in contributing in some way to the harmony, efficiency, effectiveness, and output of an organisation. Additionally, such persons expect to find personal fulfilment through job satisfaction, realising their potential, a sense of accomplishment, and, of course, appropriate remuneration. How can a student at tertiary level evolve into the kind of individual who can achieve such lofty goals, both professionally and personally?

Evolve, indeed! By wisely using one's experiences at a tertiary level institution, it is possible to develop the kinds of skills and attitudes expected in the modern work environment. Even before, but especially at the tertiary level, students would be wise to understand how systems work within their immediate environment at least, and, concurrently, to develop their own systems for coping and succeeding. This includes creating structures and sub-structures that support an organised lifestyle and "study style." In order to do this, students must garner survival information through reading, listening, observing, analysing, and asking questions. This will form the basis for any kind of informed critique on their part.

The aforementioned skills can be acquired and practised every waking minute of every day. By being attentive, a student would become aware of the myriad opportunities presented in lectures and tutorials to think, organise, and create during the process of self-discovery. A tertiary level student is usually encouraged to learn, think, and share but, sometimes, it is the art of communication that may pose an obstacle to so doing. It is certainly worth the effort to consciously develop skills such as asking, requesting, interrupting, criticising, complaining, disagreeing, arguing, persuading, insisting, asserting, and advising, which are only some of the linguistic skills essential to successful coexistence.

Many areas of human endeavour require teamwork as a core element of productivity. Working in a group or as a team proves to be one of the greatest challenges to students at any level. If a student can utilise group-work experiences to develop and fine-tune the skills of negotiation, monitoring, task definition, and elaboration, and the attitudes of mutual respect, responsibility, accountability, and reliability, then it becomes evident that workplace preparation is not a separate course that one registers for.

The comment has often been made that too many students entering the workplace directly after undergraduate studies do not have coping or personal management skills. I have heard stories of mothers packaging home-cooked frozen meals for the week for the university student, who is sometimes too overwhelmed with studies to even unfreeze these meals, finding it more convenient to buy ready-to-go meals. The stories continue of mothers doing the laundry on weekends and even driving up to the student's apartment to do the housekeeping. What learning is taking place there? How will such individuals cope with unnerving deadlines at work and keeping a tidy office?

It is ironic that we contend that the skills under discussion are designed with the workplace in mind, when indeed they are really life skills. It is therefore sad that educational institutions find it necessary to institute regulations concerning plagiarism and cheating because of the difficulty some have in choosing between the "easy-fix" and the "blood and sweat" avenues. Young adult students are thus urged to hold fast to the more idealistic goals that they may have held for themselves as younger students at secondary school. They are both a safe anchor and a propeller.

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