

The movie, *Erin Brockovich*, depicts a single mother's struggle to become successful and to provide for her family, but it also is a representation of what a learning society entails. What is a learning society, you might ask? Well, it is a term given to describe recent developments in education across the life span and it is used to help guide institutions and individuals worldwide in their educational goals (EAD 860, Syllabus). The movie, *Erin Brockovich*, helps support the idea of a learning society, because it shows Erin's interactions with certain aspects of it and it gives some great real world examples. Some of these examples include Erin learning through the unstructured domain, her having the "right stuff," and her being able to exhibit some of her multiple intelligences.

One key element of the learning society that the movie represents is the unstructured domain of learning. When we think of learning we think of acquiring information, ideas, skills, and attitudes that lead to changes in behavior (EAD 860, Unit 1.2). We sometimes think this type of learning is done through a formal class or lecture format, but in a learning society that is not always the case. Erin did not learn how to be a paralegal in school nor did she receive a degree. She learned the basics of being a paralegal through unstructured learning. Unstructured learning refers to the unplanned experiences of everyday living from which we learn (EAD 860, Unit 1.9). While working in the law office, Erin came across the Hinkley real estate file and questioned why it involved medical records; this finding then sparked something in her to learn more. She did not plan for this to happen, but this everyday experience of filing papers led her on a path to unstructured learning. She read through hours and hours of paperwork and conducted outside research of her own. She did not have teachers, but she did have exposure and access to lawyers and other paralegals that had first-hand knowledge about the subject. It was spontaneous, unexpected, and occurred by chance. Many people experience learning through this unstructured domain and even though it is not in a formal classroom, it is no less useful or meaningful to an individual, particularly when the learning stems from reflection or experience (EAD 860, Unit 1.9).

Another element of the learning society that is represented is the concept of having the "right stuff." The idea of having the "right stuff," comes from the author Thomas Friedman, who describes it as important aspects you must develop in order to become a productive learner in the learning society (Friedman, *The Right Stuff*). Erin represents many of these key pieces. First Erin displays a great passion for learning how to learn. Erin did this by immersing herself in the material related to the case. She read documents over and over again, and if she didn't understand something she found someone who did, like the professor from the local college that told her about hexavalent chromium (*Erin Brockovich*). She taught herself how to conduct proper research by reaching out to people, asking the correct questions, and even going door to door to collect over one hundred signatures. Erin exhibited more of the "right stuff," when it came to her passion and curiosity. She was passionate about providing for her children and helping the people of Hinkley, and her curiosity drove her to find the answers (Friedman, *The Right Stuff*). Friedman writes, "That innocent passion for a certain job, without knowing the salary or the working hours or the preparation required, is what you

need to get back in touch with (Friedman, *The Right Stuff*).” Erin’s true passion and curiosity set her apart from her colleagues and made her a unique individual with the “right stuff.”

Finally, another key element of the learning society that was represented in the movie was how Erin represented two intelligences from Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences. A learning society does not involve one type of learner with a specific intelligence it involves many learners of different ages and abilities. Gardner believed that intelligence was not just a single entity, in fact each of us are made up of several different intelligences, each with its own strengths and challenges (Howard Gardner, *Infed*). Two of the multiple intelligences that Erin represents are interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. Interpersonal intelligence deals with the capacity to understand the intentions, motivations, and desires of other people. And intrapersonal intelligence deals with the understanding of one’s own fears, emotions, and motivations (Howard Gardner, *Infed*). Erin was a great example of both of these because the feelings and frustrations that she felt toward the Hinkley case made her truly bond with the Hinkley people. She embraced both of these intelligences to help the Hinkley people by making them feel comfortable and having them open up to her. She spoke to each of the plaintiffs on a personal level, because she knew that they would not respond well to outsiders. Erin made a connection with these families and it was evident when she was asked to recite a random plaintiff’s phone number. Not only did she do that, but she also recited the names of the entire family involved, what their individual illnesses were, and the phone numbers of their other close relatives (*Erin Brockovich*).

Erin Brockovich’s life story is told through the concept of the learning society. She decided to take a path to further her educational goals and improve her life for her children. Erin talks about this journey with author Daniel Levin. “I wanted to be a doctor when I was a kid, but I was a dyslexic. Everyone called me stupid and told me I would never achieve anything great. I’d always had high hopes for myself, but I never thought I’d do a toxic litigation, and have a movie made about it named after me, starring someone like Julia Roberts. If I had said anything like that, people would have called me crazy (*The Real Erin Brockovich*).” She must have been crazy then, because it did in fact happen.