

The idea of a learning society is made up of many different elements. Many of these elements deal with what should be learned, how it should be learned, and why it should be learned. The main character in the movie *Erin Brockovich* represents many of those elements as she learns the skills necessary for her new career.

One of the first elements of the learning society that Erin represents in the movie is the idea that learning should be a lifelong endeavor. According to Ya-Hui Su in "The learning society as itself: lifelong learning, individualization of learning and beyond education," in a learning society "we believe that learning as an activity should continue throughout one's life." (Su, 2007, p. 197.) In order to develop the skills necessary for her new position, Erin had to do a lot of learning on her own at an age when most people consider their education complete. Su also states that another aspect of lifelong learning is "that what we learn is temporarily certain and thus we need to relearn constantly throughout our lives" (Su, 2007, p. 198.) Erin's knowledge of how to care for her family was temporary and she needed to learn a new way to care for them after her husband left her.

Another element of the learning society is that learning is an individualized endeavor. To Su, "individualization of learning is a condition where one is presented with many learning issues and activities which wait for one's own construction according to how one reflects upon one's own life." (Su, 2007, p. 198.) In essence, what should be learned by an individual is determined by how the individual sees their own situation. In this case, one of the reasons Erin learned to become a paralegal was because she perceived it as necessary to be able to contribute to her employer and, thereby, maintain her job.

A third element of the learning society that Erin demonstrated is that significant learning often occurs in the workplace as a result of doing one's job. This is especially true when a learner must go beyond their current capabilities to be successful. According to Knud Illeris in "Workplace learning and learning theory," this significant, far-reaching kind of learning "is often what is demanded by ordinary people in order to keep up with changes in their environment or situation, whether it be inside or outside the workplace." (Illeris, 2003, p. 169.) Erin did not have any training or experience as a paralegal when she was hired. Learning to become a paralegal on one's own while doing the job is no small task.

Two additional elements of the learning society that were seen in the movie *Erin Brockovich* come from the chapter titled "The Right Stuff" from Thomas Friedman's book *The World is Flat*. The first of these is the idea that in order to learn, learners need to be able to navigate and sift through the significant amount of information that they are exposed to. Although Friedman's book refers primarily to the Web and that was not a technology that Erin had at the time, this need for navigation can also be applied to any type of information that learners need to process. Erin spent a significant amount of time gathering, sorting, organizing and even memorizing the facts of the case. She had to compile information for hundreds of sources, some of which she solicited herself while other information was given to her without her request. In order to use all of that information, she had to "sift through it and separate the noise, the filth and

the lies from the facts, the wisdom, and the real sources of knowledge.” ( Friedman, 2007, p. 310.)

While all of these elements of a learning society can be seen in the movie, the element that the movie most clearly demonstrates is the need for curiosity and passion about a subject for real, substantial learning to occur. Friedman states that “curiosity and passion for a job, for success, for a subject area or even a hobby are so much more important than they once were.” (Friedman, 2007, p. 313.) Even though she had no formal training, Erin learned to be a paralegal, learned about toxicology and learned about the plant operating process at PG&E because of her curiosity as to how all of the details of a real estate transaction fit together. That curiosity lead her to make connections between different pieces of information and investigate even further. Through her research, she met hundreds of the people affected by the situation and it was her passion to help those people that drove her to continue the case even when she had to sacrifice time with her family.

The story of Erin Brockovich shows that, as individuals, people will learn different things in different ways for different reasons and in many cases, will have to learn it on their own to be successful.