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FYS 1193

29 November 2018

How to Pursue an Education Without a Degree

Higher education is one of the most powerful tools modern society has for arming citizens with skills and knowledge. Through these institutions, individuals gain the tools they need to exceed in their respective fields and drive society forward. However, formal education is not the only path to knowledge. In the movie *Nightcrawler*, screenwriter and director Dan Gilroy highlights an avenue through which one can improve themselves: experiential learning. The film follows Louis Bloom, a psychopath who stumbles upon a couple of stringers recording a car crash, and embarks on a mission to become successful in the field at all odds. His path into this career, one where freelance videographers record accidents and crimes to sell to news stations, reveals the grim sensationalism of modern news. Bloom's true character is revealed when he goes from recording crimes to committing them in order to get the shots he wants. While the main character is not one we can sympathize with, his empathetic actions guides the audience to follow him as he turns his entry to stringing into one of the most impressive and frightening learning experiences, all to get ahead.

Louis Bloom is the psychopathic protagonist of *Nightcrawler*. In the opening scenes of the movie, we are shown him stealing scrap metal, assaulting a guard, and trying unsuccessfully to get a job at the scrap yard he is selling to. Before any of his dark capabilities are revealed, we are immediately made to empathize with him. Bloom is a hard worker and a smooth talker, but

he is in a desperate position and struggling to get out of it. In his book *Story: Style, Structure, Substance, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, author Robert McKee reveals the key to the audience's involvement with Bloom. "Deep within the protagonist the audience recognizes a certain shared humanity. . . . The unconscious logic of the audience goes like this: 'This character is like me. Therefore, I want him to have whatever it is he wants, because if I were he in those circumstances, I'd want the same thing for myself'" (140). At certain points in the story, Bloom commits unforgivable atrocities, endangering the lives of civilians, fellow stringers, and even his own partner in order to succeed. However, we as the audience empathize with his work ethic and politeness, and even if we disagree with what he is doing, we understand why he is, what ends he is hoping to achieve. Because of this, Bloom remains a compelling protagonist in spite of his horrible actions. Due to the movie's lack of judgement of his actions, the audience is invited to root for him, and while his actions are untenable, many would agree his success is justified. Understanding some of the traits that make Bloom empathetic is also the key to how he's able to turn this experience into a form of experiential higher learning. These traits are namely perseverance, desire, and networking.

Bloom is remarkably persistent. His entrance to the world of "nightcrawling" is fraught with embarrassment, harassment, and missteps. He parks too close to incidents, gets too close to accidents and crime scenes, and angers police, civilians, and fellow stringers alike. In the face of these failures, Bloom is unperturbed. He learns from these errors and does not let the temporary defeat stop him. In the science of success, a term known as "grit" is often thrown around. Researchers at the University of Edinburgh studied the grit model, defined as the combination of persistence and consistency of interest, and found that "perseverance appeared as the most

important factor in predicting longterm achievement” (Abuhassan, Bates 212). Bloom proves this in the persistent way he pursues his education. He is constantly putting himself at risk and in awkward positions, but learning all the way. As in movies such as *Dead Poet Society*, the audience is shown how much is to be learned in a situation when one continues in spite of the possibility or result of failure. Even though a character might run the risk of embarrassing themselves in front of the class by reciting impromptu poetry, or face rejection when asking out a girl, the kind of greatness one strives for is only achievable when they reconcile with the possibility of defeat. The risk of failure and ability to keep going when he makes a mistake is part of what makes Bloom’s experience as a stringer a form of higher education.

Desire is another of Bloom’s keys to success. During a talk with the news director of a station he sells to, Bloom remarks, “I’m thinking television news might just be something I love, as well as something I happen to be good at.” From his first glimpses of what this career might be able to do for Bloom, it becomes his sole mission to succeed in the field. He finds satisfaction in the approval of those at the station, the money he is now able to earn, and the opportunities afforded to him by his involvement. As Bloom mentions, “[he hasn’t] had what you would call much of a formal education, but you can find most anything if you look hard enough.” Bloom desperately wants to succeed, and that leads him to seek more relevant and impactful knowledge. From his remarks about communication, initiative, and business opportunity, the audience sees how much he knows and how well he is able to perform in business. This comes from his desire to succeed and passion for the craft. In the paper *On the Role of Passion in Performance*, researchers uncover how important it is for one to be excited about their craft. “An autonomous internalization occurs when individuals have freely accepted the activity as important for them

without any contingencies attached to it. As seen earlier, this type of internalization produces a motivational force to engage in the activity willingly, and engenders a sense of volition and personal endorsement about pursuing the activity” (Vallerand et al. 509). Several times Bloom remarks that recording bad things is his job to defend his actions, going so far as to justify recording his partner dying. Clearly, taking this principle to the extent and in the direction that Bloom does is not how a student should operate. However, one’s ability to desire something so intensely and internalize their purpose gives them the motivation to find the knowledge they seek. Bloom has willingly accepted his role as the man who gets the shot, no matter how unethical it may be, and this makes him want to learn about it. This leads him to research techniques a burgeoning film student might, such as framing. According to Bloom, “A proper frame not only draws the eye in to a picture but keeps it there longer, dissolving the barrier between the subject and the outside of the frame.” This can be seen in myriad films about higher education. *The Paper Chase*, *Educating Rita*, *The Social Network*, and *Silence of the Lambs* all see a protagonist with a burning desire to accomplish their task, and one of the greater results that is seen is the attainment of knowledge all the characters experience. Regardless of the medium of study, a passion to learn about it is what will make it stick.

The film also highlights Bloom’s ability to network and communicate effectively. One of the goals of many students is to emerge from college with the beginnings of a professional network, and this is something Bloom excels at. Higher education is often the first opportunity one has to engage with professionals and mentors in a way they have not before, and *Nightcrawler* shows how that can play out somewhere other than a college campus. In the paper “*What’s in it for us?*” *Six Dyadic Networking Strategies in Academia*, researchers in Switzerland

reflected on a panel hosted at the “annual meeting of the Language and Social Interaction Division at the Università Della Svizzera italiana” (Labrie et al. 1). They found six types of networking used in academia, and Bloom provides an impressive example for several of them. The first category is active-passive networking. Active networking is when one purposefully reaches out to others in order further their options, and passive networking is what occurs as a natural result of the scholar’s research (2). In the case of Bloom, he leverages his position to meet professionals in his field, gaining knowledge and connections. His work, too, provides networking, as he is recognized and praised by the anchors of the station he sells to. Bloom’s strategies are examples of the second category as well, strategic-spontaneous networking. This is the understanding of networking that happens impromptu on a daily basis, as well strategically attempting to be noticed (2). Here, Bloom uses a combination of planning his advances ahead of time as well as using what he has in the moment to leverage every situation to his favor. In his critique on portrayals of capitalism and mental illness, Dr. Sean Brayton remarks that “nearly all of Lou’s relations are framed as economic transactions. His conversations are based on leverage and bargaining, situations where he aims to optimize his gains and minimize his shortcomings” (76). Bloom’s disregard for others and careful analysis makes him a terrifyingly good networker both when planned and spontaneous. Every conversation is an opportunity for him. Bloom also exemplifies the last variety of networking discussed in *Six Dyadic Networking Strategies in Academia*: what’s in it for me-what’s in it for us. Here, researchers remark that life, and academia in particular, is reciprocal. When trying to get something from someone, a person must offer something in return (3). Bloom is a master at negotiating and bargaining, understanding perfectly what he has to offer and gain in every situation. Every discussion that results in Bloom

getting what he wants includes him describing what is in it for the other person. Bloom is able to use all of these techniques and more in order to make himself a student of the craft, and further his career beyond what a simple education can provide.

Barely any of Bloom's backstory is offered to us, but one thing that is clear is his lack of a formal education. However, he has skills and mindsets that allow him to turn the entry into a career into a learning experience that rivals what occurs in a classroom. Using traits that should be common among college students, Bloom provides an example of how one can excel in pursuing knowledge, regardless of the setting. It becomes obvious that a lack of ethics and disregard for others can twist these traits into something horrifying, but in the end we see Bloom successful. The movie is not telling the audience that what he did was wrong, but the gruesome means to the ends of success. Reflecting on the movie, one recognizes the faults in Bloom's actions, but the empathetic connection built in to the character also provides the audience with unique insight. While it is important to recognize the psychopathic nature of Bloom's operations, one can see how to get ahead, and more importantly, how they can pursue higher education outside of the restricted world of academia.

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