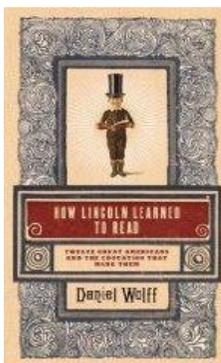


Professional Book Review

Wolff, D. (2009). *How Lincoln Learned to Read: Twelve Great Americans and the Educations That Made Them*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing. 345 pp., ISBN: 978-1596912901 (hc). \$26.00.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Joswick, University of Colorado, U. S. A.



How Lincoln Learned to Read by Daniel Wolff, an author of another nonfiction book *4th of July, Asbury Park: A History of the Promised Land* (2006), is an engaging trip through the history of the educational system. The importance of context and culture in education is at the forefront as Wolff traces the birth of our current school system by documenting the educational experiences of those he refers to as “twelve great Americans.” The book describes the lives and experiences of Benjamin Franklin, Abigail Adams, Andrew Jackson, Sojourner Truth, Abraham Lincoln, Thocmetony (Princess Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins), Henry Ford, W. E. B. Dubois, Helen Keller, Rachel Carson, John F. Kennedy, and Elvis Presley. Each of the people discussed came from a distinctive background, rich with opportunities from which they learned, and others can also learn from their backgrounds. What is most salient throughout these stories is the prevalence of what Frank Smith (1998) calls the classic model of learning. In the classic model, learning is a natural process that takes place through interaction with the environment and groups of people engaging in the material we are trying to learn. Learning is not always an intentional and difficult process and can take place by naturally soaking up information from our environment.

In Wolff’s book, the family, cultural, and historical settings were more important to all learners than their organized schooling. The theme of the book is captured in the quote, “How Lincoln learned to read at this level was ... at home: slowly, out loud, often before an audience” (Wolff, p. 108). Regardless of the learners’ formal schooling, it was the historical context and experiences outside of schooling that shaped their ideals, beliefs, and ultimate achievements in life. Franklin dropped out of several schools and began his writing career under a pseudonym, criticizing the political environment of the times. His first publications were in a journal produced by his brother. Elvis learned to sing at the Assembly of God church in Tupelo, Mississippi. Thocmetony learned the importance of nature and one’s surroundings, as well as the difficulty in melding her Paiute with European-White culture, from her grandfather and from the “49ers” who traveled through her native land. W. E. B. Dubois learned from his community the

importance of education in elevating one's status. In addition to learning about the experiences of these individuals, the reader learns about the development of our educational system and the importance of the cultural context of learning.

Wolff makes a convincing argument about the importance of our circumstances in learning. The style, language, and accessibility of the text also make his book a pleasure to read. However, as a critical assessment of education and educational theory, Wolff's book lacks several components. Wolff does not describe his methodology in researching the lives of the people he chronicles. Although he does provide an extensive bibliography and references section, no direct explanation of methodology is included. Nor does he posit a specific theory of learning or give any recommendations on teaching. As stated earlier, I believe Wolff is driving home the importance of learning as a natural occurrence in the company of peers and his belief that learning is culturally and contextually driven; however, this is not explicitly stated. I located this text in the "Education" section of my local bookstore, but it could just as well have been in the History section. Although this is a highly engaging, entertaining, and eye-opening book on the history of our educational system, I would not classify this book as specifically about education.

Despite the shortcomings, the book offers a refreshing insight to educators. The text reminded me of the importance of the historical and cultural context for my learners as well as for me as an educator. I am an instructor at the University of Colorado Boulder, working in a retention program for low income, minority, and first-generation college students. My everyday work experience puts me in contact with a variety of learners and backgrounds. It is important for me to remember their backgrounds when instructing and to allow several explanations and styles in the classroom. It is important for educators to keep in mind that our students bring with them a unique set of knowledge and learning tools and we need to tap into them for effective education. In addition, it is necessary to remember that education is a means to an end, and the end depends on the learner. Wolff describes this phenomenon well in his tracing of the education of diverse people from different cultures, times, and experiences. Each historical figure mentioned went on to achieve great things in different ways. This historical text gives a valuable lesson to educators that our learners enter the classroom with important knowledge from their backgrounds and follow a diversity of trajectories as they leave. I highly recommend this book to remind us of the importance of the context of our learners.

References

- Smith, F. (1998). *The book of learning and forgetting*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Wolff, D. (2006). *4th of July, Asbury Park: A History of the Promised Land*. London: Bloomsbury.