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Editor’s Notebook: Waiting for the Late Bloomer

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Waiting For The Late-Bloomer

By William Levin

I recently found a stack of my old grade school report cards. The year-end comments are revealing. Miss Rack wrote of my fourth-grade efforts that “I am positive that Billy can do better than passing work. He prefers to waste his time, paying little attention and not trying at all.” (I should report that I was in love with Miss Rack, and these comments on my report card did some damage to the relationship.) Mr. Glasser found me little changed by the sixth grade. “These grades are a direct result of William’s unwillingness to assume the necessary responsibilities of sixth grade. He has often proven that with some application he could achieve better grades. His future success at school will be directly related to the rate at which he matures.” (I did not love Mr. Glasser.)

I, however, was not about to mature academically anytime soon. I did not start taking school seriously until the second semester of my junior year at Boston University. I am, then, a “late-bloomer,” a person whose achievements come well after the age at which society normally expects them.

Since early 1988 Jack Levin of Northeastern University and I have been studying educational late-bloomers in America. (Jack is also an educational late-bloomer, having first made the academic probation list and then the Dean’s list in college.) We began by conducting in-depth interviews with a sample of Northeastern University students who were poor or mediocre students in high school, but became honor roll students at Northeastern. Here is what has emerged as a model for the way educational late-blooming seems to occur.

Capacity

First, students must have the capacity to do academic work. Aside from the intellectual capacity to do school work, we have found among educational late-bloomers a sort of emotional capacity which allows them to make intense commitments to activities other than school work. While getting D’s and C’s in high school, the late-bloomers we spoke to were often fanatic “students” of rock music, sports, television programs, old films and so on. Ask a boy who is about to flunk the eighth grade about the players on professional sports teams and their performance statistics, and he will likely get an “A” for his encyclopedic knowledge. The ability to learn the names and positions of hundreds of athletes could easily be translated into “A’s” in school since both require the ability to memorize long lists of essentially meaningless information.

Opportunity

All the late-bloomers we spoke to were able to get into college and to stay in school in spite of their poor academic performance. American society appears to be unique among societies with formal systems of education in the extent to which individuals are given the opportunity to continue in school despite poor performance. In Japan, England, Germany, in fact, essentially everywhere, if you haven’t performed on time, you get no chance to continue to higher education. In America, however, 34% of all colleges have open-access admissions policies and, as at Bridgewater, older students are increasingly encouraged to return to, or even begin undergraduate degrees. Of course, late-blooming is still largely a middle to upper-class phenomenon. Families must be willing and able to do without the salary that a mediocre student could be earning if he or she were not still in school, waiting to bloom.

Stimulating Event

At some point, given the intellectual and emotional capacity, and the opportunity to continue in school despite poor performance, something must occur which motivates an individual to want to do academic work. The late-bloomers we interviewed reported both positive and negative forms of such stimuli. Among the positive ones were 1) taking a course with an excellent teacher who made learning seem rewarding, 2) finding the subject to major in which might not have been available in high school (e.g. engineering, anthropology, philosophy and so on) and 3) making friends for whom doing well in school is already important. Among the more negative stimulating events were 1) realizing, typically in the junior or senior year, that unless something changes you are going to be qualified to do for a living only things you do not want to do and 2) being told by parents that they will no longer pay tuition or housing costs for a college student who will not do college work.

Once some combination of these stimuli focus the attention of the potential late-bloomer on doing school work, she or he typically does so with great drive and energy. They seem to derive more pleasure from their academic success than students who have always gotten high grades, and even seem to maintain their motivation to perform longer and more intensely than early-achievers. So far as we can tell from our research to this point, parents of potential late-bloomers and people who hope to bloom themselves have reason to be patient for the time when capacity and opportunity are joined by the right stimulating events. Late-blooming may well occur in school and beyond.