

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Megan Brodie, a Co-op Coordinator at the University of Guelph in Ontario, was one of a handful of professionals who read the *Learning From Experience* manuscript and reacted to it while it was a work-in-progress. We thought she would be a great person to interview Scott Weighart about the completed book.

Megan Brodie (MB): So...what was the inspiration behind writing this book? What did you hope to achieve?

Scott Weighart (SW): I would say that there were two important incentives for writing the book. First, I've had the opportunity to present at quite a few conferences around North America over my years as a coordinator. Whenever I do so, I am always struck by how eager my fellow educators are to learn about best practices. In some cases, there are professionals who are one of very few practitioners at their institution—or maybe even the only one! In others—like here at Northeastern or at, say, Waterloo—there may be dozens of people who do similar jobs. Either way, though, my sense is that many of us lament the fact that we know relatively little about what others in the profession are doing. So a second incentive was my sense that many of us end up either reinventing the wheel or being quite content with our own ways of running a program, whereas exposure to ideas from other professionals and programs inevitably makes any of us rethink how and why we do what we do. So my motivation was to come up with a book that would bring many expert opinions together while also satisfying that hunger to learn that I have seen out there at conferences.

As for what I hope to achieve, I think that there are many aspirations that I have for this book. I am hopeful that anyone in our profession would want to have the book readily on hand, so they can consult it whenever they are pondering any number of challenges we face in our programs—teaching a prep course, reflection, troubleshooting problems, building relationships with employers, and so forth. So I like the idea that the book gives any educator quick access to what several experts have to say on just about any topic that might come up in our jobs.

Yet I by no means think of the book as the be-all end-all authority on these topics. In that sense, I hope that the book will be provocative for educators. Someone may read a section and take issue with my idea or those of one of the contributors, saying “I just don't agree with that at all!” That's fine. The book is not meant to be a bland, dry manual; there are definitely challenging ideas in it. If those ideas make you decide that you want to do exactly the opposite of what one of our experts suggests, I think that's valuable, too. I've certainly had that happen to me many times in my career—times when I've decided I would do the exact opposite of how someone else was running their program.

So on the whole, I hope that the book inspires dialogue about our profession, both within and between academic institutions. I've never been completely satisfied with how I've run my own

program, and encouraging the spirit of questioning how and why we do what we do with students and employers is healthy.

MB: Did you have a predetermined layout for the themes of this book, or how did they evolve?

SW: Not at all. All of my training as a writer, whether in fiction or non-fiction, has taught me that it's a mistake to attempt to plan themes when you're writing something. For example, I think it's just a bad idea to say, "I'm going to write a short story revolving around the theme of man's inhumanity to man." I always have been taught to let the themes emerge throughout the writing.

With my last book, *Exceeding Expectations: Mastering The Seven Keys To Success*, I certainly didn't start off by pulling those seven keys to success out of the air and then trying to prove that they existed. I just dove in to writing a ton of mini-stories about professional behavior, and later I analyzed them to see what the themes were. That's how I came up with the seven keys to success.

With this book, I would go even further and say that not only did I have nothing much in mind with themes before the book started—I also would say that my rough outline of the content has only a vague resemblance to the final product! Given that I was interviewing 17 professionals, it was hard to say what kind of content would emerge, let alone what the book's themes might be. Also, sometimes you don't know what needs to be in a book or within one of its chapters till you start writing it. In some cases, colleagues like Linnea Basu from Northeastern or Nancy Johnston from Simon Fraser University reacted to an early draft and raised a question that I clearly had failed to answer, so that led to many twists as well. Linnea pushed me to include more on counseling theory, and Nancy believed I needed to cover learning theory in a more substantial way. This was good input, and I responded with a real overhaul of that material.

So to answer your question, the themes started popping up through those interviews and became increasingly apparent as each chapter was written. Some of them were not surprising. One reason I wrote the book, as I said earlier, was my concern that too many of us in the field are reinventing the wheel. So it makes sense that this turned out to be a theme of the book. Yet there were other themes I hadn't really anticipated. I think I underestimated how lost and/or dismayed educators are about reflection, and some of the ways to overcome the challenges of reflection were not what I would have predicted.

Another example: Nancy Johnston knows much more than I do about knowledge transfer, and we spoke a great deal throughout this project. Inevitably our conversations made me rethink what I was doing with my own students, and so I was able to try out some new approaches while the book was still in process. It was kind of ironic and appropriate, simultaneously: Here I am trying to write a book to tell people how to do this job as well as possible, and I ended up with a book that is telling ME how to do MY job better! In turn, though, that reinforces the book's theme that learning opportunities are everywhere and that none of us ever stops learning—wherever we are as professionals.

MB: The contributors obviously played a large role—not only providing content through the transcribed interviews, but also influencing the ideas and themes as you just mentioned. What was your relationship to these people before beginning this book?

SW: The degree to which I knew people beforehand varied dramatically. Obviously, it was easy—maybe a little too easy—to work with people here at Northeastern. There are probably two dozen people here alone who all would have been great, and I would have liked to incorporate all of them if that were possible. However, I knew that I needed to have balance and variety; I tried hard to get input from people that represented a good range geographically. I also wanted to have some community college people, some Canadian institutions, and educators who represented a wide range of majors. I wanted to make sure that we would have examples from engineering, arts and sciences, and health sciences as well as my own work with business majors.

With the Northeastern contributors, I tried to pick people who had specific areas of expertise that would be valuable to the project. Bob Tillman can opine on anything related to co-op very effectively, but I think of him as especially strong on professional behavior, ethics, and the transition from student to employee. Ronnie Porter is our resident guru on students with disabilities, plus I like how she works with arts and sciences employers. Charlie Bognanni and I work closely together, but he also has done a great deal with me on Millennial Generation issues. Kate McLaughlin runs our music industry program, and I think she has done some really innovative work with technology, reflection, and providing a learning structure for students who might really drift without that. I could go on, but you get the idea.

Beyond Northeastern, there were various ways in which I identified contributors. I have seen Nancy Johnston present, and I always have loved her style as well as her content. She is much stronger than I am on learning theory, and I knew we needed more expertise there. I know Anita Todd really well from many CEIA conferences, and I always have had a ton of respect for her. I had met Marie Sacino and Tamara Pinkas at conferences and already collaborated with Marie, while Tamara and I are kicking off a collaborative effort later this year. I met Nancy Chiang and Kirk Patterson from Waterloo at CAFCE, and I knew right away that I really wanted that Waterloo field coordinator perspective in the book—particularly for the employer chapters—so those two were easy choices. I asked my colleague Bob Tillman for his recommendations, and that's how I connected with Bernadette Friedrich and Brenda LeMaster—though I had met Brenda at a CEIA Conference as well.

Someone recommended Patricia Bazrod of Georgia Tech to me, but when we spoke she was absolutely adamant that her colleague Tom Akins would be the better choice for my project. Steven Brookfield's one lengthy contribution is simply a talk on learning and teaching that I heard him give at Northeastern a few years ago. Not sure who referred me to Kerry Mahoney, though it could have been Nancy Johnston. In any event, there were only five contributors with whom I had no previous relationship before I started the book.

The next step with the contributors was simultaneously trying to play to their strengths in terms of expertise while also making sure we covered every major topic of the book. Keeping it all straight was a challenge. Ultimately, I opted to create an Excel spreadsheet to track how many interviewees had discussed each of the various topics. So when I was preparing to interview the last few contributors, I would look over the spreadsheet and see if we needed more content on developing employer relationships, reflection, or any other specific topic.

MB: How have you personally been influenced by examining the profession and your own program through this process? What feedback have you received from others who have read the book?

SW: Probably the biggest change has been that I am much more conscious of seeking out opportunities to embed learning into processes. I have been trying much harder to leverage the learning wherever I can. A few years ago, I didn't really do much beyond a somewhat dissatisfying small-group reflection seminar after the students returned from co-op. Before this book, I already was moving in a direction of digging deeper into what was learned while on co-op, but I'm doing much more now. I keep hearing Nancy Johnston's voice in my head, pushing me to ask students more about what they learned and how they learned it.

So now I am having pretty lengthy one-on-one meetings with students after their work term. I ask them to talk about what they learned on co-op, breaking it into three categories: technical, non-technical, and self-awareness learning. I go on to ask them to describe their top specific accomplishment, which ties back to the work we did in co-op class on behavioral-based interviewing; basically, their answer *becomes* one of their BBI stories for their next round of interviews.

In general, one big realization has been that I don't have to accept a somewhat mediocre status quo when it comes to reflection. I am feeling very energized about trying new things in that area. We also are now debating about how we should and should not use technology in teaching our co-op preparation course, so Kerry Mahoney's insights from Waterloo are going to be really helpful in that process.

As for feedback from those who have read the book, it's a little early to have much of it just yet. Perhaps the most touching response was from one of the book's final proofreaders. She is an educator, but she has never worked in the field of cooperative education. Apparently the book made her feel as if she has kind of missed the boat with her career—it made her wish she had the opportunity to become a co-op coordinator! She said she just got swept up with the passion and energy that all of the contributors obviously bring to the profession.

Beyond that, I always say that writing a book is like sending out a message in a bottle from a deserted island. You never quite know who the book will reach and what ultimate impact it will have. With my other books, I still get unbelievable feedback from people—sometimes years after the book was published. It's all very unpredictable but quite nice.

MB: What do you see as the current and upcoming challenges for this profession?

SW: The economy is the obvious current challenge. In the book, I talk about how developing an array of jobs is somewhat analogous to being a mutual fund manager. By that I mean that you ideally want to diversify your program to minimize your risk. For example, it's not wise for a computer science co-op coordinator to cultivate relationships purely with high-tech companies, nor would a finance co-op coordinator want to have a "portfolio" of nothing but jobs in financial services. When you have a homogenous mix of employers, well, when you're hot, you're hot—but if that sector nosedives, you are in serious trouble.

That philosophy holds up pretty well for educators who are working with a broad major such as business. However, if your program is implicitly narrow in scope, you're going to have a hard time if the economy hits your sector. Right now our civil engineering and architecture programs face the biggest struggles, and there is only so much my colleagues in those areas can do. If there is little building going on, there is not going to be much hiring in those areas.

With the possible exception of health care, education, and some areas of technology, the economy is having a significant impact on almost all of us in the field of cooperative education and internship. The challenge is for us to remember that this situation, too, is a learning opportunity for us and for our students. With the latter, we are preaching the need to be more open minded and adaptable than ever. Sure, the student might want a job in financial services, but maybe she should consider something in IT right now. Yes, a student might strongly prefer to be in downtown Boston, but if getting a good job means moving to New Jersey or rural Pennsylvania, it's great to be open to that. I think we need to encourage students to "zig" when everyone else is "zagging."

Another message for students during this economy is that "being 'good enough' is no longer good enough." A few years ago, it was a seller's market, and employers were content to hire someone who seemed to be good enough to do the job... if they could find such a person. Now there are often a half-dozen students who are not only good enough to do that job, they are all showing that they could be great in that job. As a result, I am pushing students much harder to research that much more thoroughly and to sweat *all* the details in the interviewing process. We literally have seen a few job offers come down to who wrote the best and most timely thank-you note after an interview! That has been a big adjustment for our third-time co-ops, who absolutely were wooed by employers in previous years.

As for future challenges, I think that there are several. We want to leverage technology to make life easier for us and our students, but we need to find ways to do so that don't adversely affect learning. Much more needs to be done with assessment. Obviously, every co-op/internship professional believes in the power of learning from practical experience. Yet we still rely too much on anecdotal data; we could use some massive longitudinal studies to better understand the long-term impact of this form of learning. Having more hard data on this front would likely lead to more institutions investing in co-op or internship programs—especially as

consumers look for that much more of a return on their considerable investment in obtaining a college degree.

Given the scrutiny of budgets at universities and colleges, I also think that it will be an ongoing challenge to maintain a focus on learning and education when there are just so many operational elements and institutional demands consuming our time. However, I am hopeful that becoming more aware of best practices across the profession can help with that, and that is one key purpose of this book.

MB: I only have one question left: What's next for you?

SW: I really have to laugh at myself sometimes. My job as a co-op coordinator is relentlessly intense from September through April, and by late March I find myself longing for May so I can have a little bit of a breather, as things slow down to some degree then. Then May finally arrives, and I revel in a slower pace for about a week or so... and then I start thinking "I'm bored! I need a project!" So if I didn't have a project in mind, I probably would come up with one in a hurry.

However, I already have two specific projects in mind for this summer—one related to co-op and one not. First, I hope to revise my *Exceeding Expectations* book. Right now, the book is a collection of about 80 stories, and all of them revolve directly around the world of co-ops and internships. Recently, though, we started a new course for our business freshmen—a one-credit course geared to getting them rolling with making the transition from student to employee. So the tentative plan is to keep the best stories of *Exceeding Expectations* but to add several dozen stories that show my "seven keys to professional success" through stories revolving more around campus life, including coursework and dealing with other challenges on campus.

I already have written about a half-dozen stories for that project. Here's a typical one: I had a student named Marissa who had pretty mediocre grades as a freshman. She went out on co-op and unfortunately didn't like her job at all... but, to my amazement, she returned to classes and pulled a 4.0 GPA for her next semester! I had no idea what happened, so I did a brief behavioral interview with her and found out how and why she completely overhauled her approach to classroom learning. There are a ton of lessons in her story for our freshmen; I think that they will connect with it completely.

My hope is that students will start to see that there are many things that they can do before they even start looking for a co-op job or internship—basically, I am urging students to work actively toward becoming the person and professional they want to be. So that's my most immediate project.

As you might know, I also do sports writing as a paid hobby of sorts, so I also have a tentative plan to write a book about Boston University's amazing story of winning the 2009 National

Championship in college hockey. That will be a real labor of love, as I will have to write it all on vacations and weekends this summer.

As a writer, I find that there are some analogies to childbirth—or at least it seems that way when I talk to women about that experience! I find that a little selective amnesia can be helpful when pondering another big push in the future. With *Learning From Experience*, I never had any doubt that I would be able to complete a good quality book on time, but it definitely challenged me at times. Probably the hardest stretch was in late August. I had been cruising comfortably, writing a chapter a week. Then I finally stepped back and realized that I needed to step up my pace because it was going to be impossible to have ample time and energy once we got into fall semester. So then I wrote something like five chapters—including a really long one—in the span of maybe three weeks. One chapter was written in one very, very long day. That wasn't too much fun, but so much of writing books has little to do with intelligence and creativity—it is much more of a matter of having the discipline to cast aside the notion of being “in the mood” to write and just do it, regardless. Anyone who can persist in doing that on a regular basis over several months absolutely can write a book... but it gets easier to believe it with every book that you finish.