

## Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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“I got the job! Now. . . “

by Dan Wulff, Taos Institute Board member

Years ago, I earned a bachelor’s degree in sociology which helped me land an entry level job in corrections. Once in that job, I was quickly aware that I was lost. My degree was my qualification for that job but I felt quite inept in working with juveniles in the correctional institution. I knew that my degree was not specifically designed to give me everything I needed to do that kind of work, but I was surprised at how unprepared I felt. To deal with this I set out to learn from my work colleagues, organized my self-directed reading, went to workshops, and did a lot of “learning by doing” on the job—and that was what I needed. As I reflected on my qualifying degree, I came to see it as basic and foundational, but only the beginning of my learning journey. The degree was my “bus ticket” to go somewhere. The “ride” to somewhere would come after boarding the bus.

This experience was replicated when I got my master’s degree, and then with my doctorate. My lingering question was: How could I convert what I had learned in school into a practical performance in a job? Extrapolating academic knowledge into a worthy real-world performance was not a given, not obvious. Somehow I was just expected to know how to navigate that transition.

Since becoming a university professor in a practice arena (social work and family therapy), I have heard versions of my academic experience from many graduates. They did well in their courses and achieved their requisite degree, but struggled mightily in their jobs. Was their academic program deficient? Did they take the wrong courses in their program? Was their job ill-suited for their academic degree? They knew they needed to do something—but what?

Using social constructionist thinking, we are reminded that practices can be manifested in many ways, some societally preferred and others less so.

Education/learning can be pursued in many ways, one of which is formal schooling. Perhaps we have made achieving a degree/certificate into a sort of proxy for knowledge or competence—the *pièce de résistance*. But if just for a moment I set aside some of the obvious social advantages that a degree can furnish (e.g., prestige, more voice, money, career advancement, job security), was my “schooling” where I learned the most? To be honest, I do not have many specific memories of my courses, my assignments, the readings I did, my grades. My best learning moments happened elsewhere—a few conversations here and there with significant people, relationships I formed, mistakes and failures, and unexpected opportunities and deviations.

For those of us in the field of education, how much have we been mesmerized by the formal structures of schooling, caught up in following the models we have participated in throughout our own schooling, or come to see the products of learning (degrees) as learning itself? As I zoom into retirement from the university, I am being drawn to ideas about what might be called “post-university learning,” that is, the significant learning that follows the formal degree conferral or occurs outside of it. Come to think of it, don’t we all have learning channels that are continuously operative throughout our lives, oftentimes going unnoticed because they are not formalized, not named? This may be where curiosity lives and animates our impulses to stretch ourselves. Now outside the pressures of performing to “climb the academic ladder,” I can focus on the ideas that I am passionate about. My learning curve is ready to jump. My journey on the bus of learning continues.