

Elliott Masie's

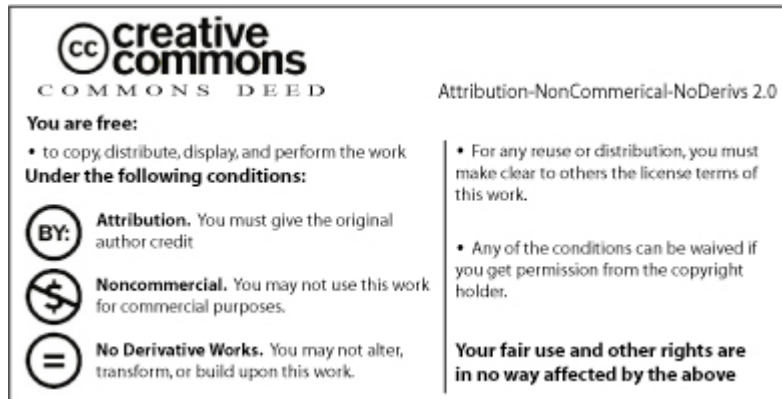
LEARNING2009

Malcolm Gladwell *Outliers*

Learning 2009 Keynote - Outliers

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Transcription of Video Segment Available at:
<http://www.learning2010.com/gladwell>



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Learning 2010 will be held from October 24-27 in Orlando, Florida.

Elliott Masie: Take *Outliers* and give us really sort of a long elevator ride view of that, and I would like to drill down with a few questions. So what's the premise behind *Outliers*?

Malcolm Gladwell: I have, from the very beginning of all my writing, have been really concerned with one issue, which is, I don't think people are built from the inside out. I think they are built from the outside in. In other words, I think we are way too concerned and overwhelmed as human beings with the way we are inherently, and the way that inherent nature makes an impact on the world around us.

We are not nearly concerned enough with the opposite, which is the way that our environments, communities [and] cultures impact and shape us. So *Tipping Point* is about that: about how trends are constructed by the environment. *Blink* is about, among other things, the way the outside environment affects how we make decisions. *Outliers* is applying that knowledge to success. It says that success comes from the outside in. It's a product of situations, of cultures, of environments, of things that people pick up from what's going on around them. In other words, we are vessels as individuals for all manner of influences.

What that message tells us is that success, however you wish to define it - and by the end of *Outliers*, how I define success is the opportunity to engage in meaningful work - is an opportunity that is given to you by the world in which you live. And if you are lucky enough to be given that opportunity and seize it, you are successful. But everything begins outside the individual. So *Outliers* is just an exploration of that idea.

Elliott Masie: So if you were sitting on an airplane, which I know you do a lot, and next to you was one of the people in this audience - a senior director of talent or learning for a major Fortune 500 company - what would you suggest was one of your perspectives or "ahas" or learnings as you explored and wrote '*Outliers*' that they might want to think about as they populate their own organizations with talent?

Malcolm Gladwell: Well, this actually is something that is not in the book [but] that I thought a lot about since writing the book. I got really interested in a wonderful psychologist named James Flynn, who has written this kind of wacky, fascinating, totally one-of-a-kind book. He is very interested in this concept called capitalization. Capitalization refers to this question of, what percentage of people in a given world, community, what have you, end up doing the thing that they are capable of doing? So here is an example of capitalization.

Michael Lewis in his book *The Blind Side* [writes] all about this kid who comes from East Memphis as a football player - fabulous football player - and the kid says at one point, "If everyone from my neighborhood," meaning the slums of East Memphis, "who was capable of playing in the NFL ended up in the NFL, they would need two NFLs." But what he was saying was [that] the capitalization rate for football, talented football players in East Memphis is really low. And Lewis then actually goes and he asks the Memphis School Board in East Memphis what percentage of kids who get football scholarships to college end up taking them, and the answer is one in five, right?

So what's the capitalization rate in East Memphis for college level football? [pause] It's 20%. I paused. My mathematician father would have been appalled by that pause as I did the math! I'm sorry, twenty percent is appalling, right? And that's for football, which we care passionately about, which we spend a lot of time trying to...you would think that our efficiency in finding and making the best of people's talents in the field of high school football would be really high. It's not in this country. It's really low.

So let's think about this in other realms. Notice, what I am saying is, what I became convinced of in writing this book and particularly in thinking of things afterwards is that our capitalization rate as a society and our ability to get the most out of the talent that people bring to the table is much lower than we think it is. Many more people are capable of doing things than is presently the case.

There are tons of ways. [Here is] another example of this. There was a book that just came out about a month ago called *Crossing the Line* that looks at the performance of colleges on a number of different metrics, but principally looks at how good a job four-year institutions do at graduating the people who they let in. The theory behind colleges is that you only let in people who are capable of graduating. Theoretically, if they got in, they should be able to graduate, right? So the question is how good a college is at doing this.

What you discover when you look at that metric, among others, is that there is unbelievable variability from college to college in their ability to do the single most important thing they are supposed to do, which is get people a degree.

When I say incredible variability, I mean that there are - by the way, this is not a question of how selective the college is; selectivity has got nothing to do with it. There are some colleges, which for whatever random reason or not random reason, do a really good job of that [getting people a degree], and some colleges that do a terrible job at that. We have not paid any attention to this fact. We have become so focused and obsessed with either the getting in part or the qualification of the student, we have forgotten that the institution itself and how it conducts its learning plays a massive role in the likelihood of a student getting the thing that they are supposed to get: out of college, right?

And it suggests, among other things - I am sorry. Am I ranting?

Elliott Masie: No, no! You are riffing.

Malcolm Gladwell: This is one of my favorite topics ever. Once again, as a Canadian, it always comes back to my "Canadianness". One of the things that we are baffled by as Canadians is the American educational system, which just seems crazy. I mean, we don't have private schools. My tuition, by the way, at University of Toronto: \$800 a year thank you very much.

But one of the things that's fascinating about this is that we persist in this country, for example, in ranking colleges according to a series of metrics that have nothing to do with their actual job. Like when you look in the U.S news ranking and Harvard is 1 and Yale is 2, what's the basis of that ranking? It is principally how much money they have in the bank and what is the educational qualification of the students they admit? Those are two things that have almost nothing to do with their actual task of educating students, right?

The real thing you should be ranking them on is what percentage of kids graduate? What percentage of kids do you find from lower income areas and manage to get up to the same level as their betters? I could go on, but you can, in other words, do a new ranking that's based on real educational metrics. And what do you find when you do that? A lot of so-called elite schools fall out of the equation entirely. *Washington Monthly* does these rankings and their number one school year in, year out is Penn State. Why? Because Penn State is a school that does a really good job of finding kids who need education and getting them an education, right? That's what a college should be, right?

And that kind of lack of clarity about how we understand the social mission of learning institutions, that strikes me as something we need to work a lot on in this country.

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