

**Write Your Dissertation First
and Other Essays
on a Graduate Education**

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An AECT Publication

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*Book Design, Layout & Cover Design: Terry R. Cortese
New Learning Concepts, Inc.
Bloomington, Indiana.*

Cover Illustration: Ray Elliot Mosley

Editor: Bruce M. Smith



ASSOCIATION FOR
EDUCATIONAL
COMMUNICATIONS &
TECHNOLOGY

*Published by the Association for Educational
Communications and Technology (AECT)
320 West 8th Street, Suite 101
Bloomington, IN 47404-3745
www.aect.org*

ISBN: 978-0-9970755-4-0

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The stories related in this book really happened.

A warm thank you to my many graduate students and colleagues who have inspired my life for more than 50 years of my academic career. Most of you will never know how much you contributed to making my career an exciting, challenging, and very enjoyable voyage. Thanks especially to those who were the participants in these stories.

A very warm thank you to my many colleagues and associates in AECT who have inspired me, encouraged me, challenged me, and have provided a professional family for whom I am forever grateful. You have made my life more rewarding than it ever could have been without your friendship and association.

A warm greeting to new graduate students who may stumble onto this book of essays. I so hope that the suggestions herein enable your professional experience to be more rewarding than it might otherwise have been.

A special thank you to Phillip Harris, Executive Director of AECT who suggested that AECT publish these essays to keep them circulating in the academic world.

To Bruce M. Smith, thank you for reading and diligently editing to get this book ready for publication.

Finally, to Terry Cortese, my reader and book designer, whose technical and creative contributions to this project far exceeded my expectations, a very special thank you.

~Dave Merrill

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PROLOGUE

After a considerable search, I finally located the seminar room on the top floor of the psychology building. In length and breadth, it was not a large room: however, the ceiling was perhaps 25 feet above the floor. High on the outside wall a dormer window allowed the warm Midwestern sun to stream into the upper corners of the room. In the center of the room 12 wooden chairs surrounded a large conference table. The hour to start had arrived and six students were already seated around the table.

At five minutes past the scheduled hour the professor entered and seated himself at the head of the table. He immediately removed a pipe from his inner coat pocket and from his side jacket pocket he fished out a tool resembling a Swiss army knife on steroids along with a packet of tobacco. Being a nonsmoker, I found the ensuing ritual of scraping, cleaning, and tapping fascinating.

Movement in the corner of my eye drew my attention from the ceremony at the head of the table, and my gaze widened to take in the rest of the table. To my astonishment, each student around the table was

holding a pipe and intently engaged in scraping, cleaning, and tapping with their own set of shiny tools.

At the conclusion of the cleaning ritual, the professor carefully placed a pinch of tobacco in the bowl of his pipe. Each student in the room did likewise, like so many reflections in a house of mirrors. A lighter ignited the professor's pipe, and six lighters flashed in response. Large spirals of blue smoke rose lazily toward the streaks of sunlight in the upper reaches of the room. Soon, the table was engulfed in a blue fog. Odors both sweet and pungent permeated the air.

The professor tilted his chair and placed both feet on the table. Six pairs of shoes joined his. As I stared at the soles of the shoes, a voice from the haze intoned, "Welcome to Experimental Psychology."

My first class in graduate school had commenced.

More than five decades have passed since I was part of this seminar in experimental psychology. Hundreds of seminar sessions have come and gone. I've participated both as a student and, more often, as the professor. (I'm happy to report, however, that I never took up smoking a pipe and was

delighted when smoking was finally banned from my seminar rooms.) In these 50 years, I have had occasion to observe a range of activities that seem to significantly enhance the experience of graduate study. In this short collection of essays, I share a few of the lessons I've learned in those decades. My hope is that readers will find some of these lessons of value in their own graduate education.

