Feature Book Review

Success in Only 10,000 Hours*

**Provided you are lucky, have the right connections, speak the right language, and . . .*

Review of: *Outliers*, by Malcolm Gladwell; 2008; 309 pp; Little, Brown, and Company (New York, NY); ISBN 978-0-316-01792-3

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Context

A group of North Star Scholars, undergraduates in the University of Minnesota's National Science Foundation-funded Alliance for Minority Participation program, met weekly with faculty and staff to discuss Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*. A typical meeting included 5–8 students and two faculty and/or staff. As we read the book, chapter by chapter, we informally discussed the book and its implications for our own success. Students took turns leading the discussions.

The Students' Perspective

How many hours would it take you to reach the pinnacle of success in music, computer science, or hockey? What do rice paddies have to do with math performance? Why does being born in January dramatically increase your chances to make the top leagues in a sport? How does a pilot's ethnicity affect the possibility of a plane crash? *Outliers* addresses these seemingly bizarre questions, and the proposed answers are thought provoking, to say the least. In developing the answers, *Outliers* debunks the typical American viewpoint that success simply and directly results from an individual's efforts and innate brilliance. In reality, success requires much more, and Malcolm Gladwell presents compelling stories that illustrate the central roles played by opportunity and legacy.

Success requires both the opportunity to prove yourself and the determination to take advantage of that opportunity. Gladwell interweaves stories about Canadian hockey players, Jewish law firms, Bill Gates, and the Beatles to

DOI: 10.1187/cbe.09-05-0035

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show that the opportunity to succeed comes in many forms, including birth date, geography, family heritage, genetics, and personal contacts. For example, Gladwell shows that Gates' success required being born in the right year, attending the right school in the right state, and meeting the right people. However, even that was not enough. Bill Gates had every necessary opportunity to be at the epicenter of the personal computer revolution, but so did many others. What separated him from less successful people with similar opportunities? Gladwell suggests that Gates' success rested on his ability to seize the opportunities and work with single-minded dedication to accumulate more than 10,000 hours of computer programming experience before almost anyone else did. This "Ten Thousand Hour Rule" represents the other side of the success coin. Opportunity and effort go hand in hand. Even with 10,000 hours of effort, an individual may never see success if the right opportunities are not available. Opportunity opens doors, but the choices and actions of individuals lead to advantages that, in turn, underlie real success.

In addition to the Opportunity/10,000 hour factor, the success equation also involves legacy, which Gladwell defines as "the traditions and attitudes we inherit from our forebears." In the second part of *Outliers*, Gladwell argues that, even for those who make the best use of available opportunities, an individual's cultural legacy can have a tremendous influence on success. The vignettes in the legacy section illustrate how culture and performance may be intertwined. For example, Gladwell suggests explanations for how learning Mandarin as a first language may create an advantage for learning mathematics. He also illustrates examples of how social class stratifications may produce miscommunication, as in the case he explores about Korean pilots and plane crashes.

Discussing the possible connection between performance and culture made all of us uncomfortable. Where is the line between stereotyping versus understanding how culture affects our viewpoints and the way we interact with others? Is it racist to attribute differences in performance to differences in culture? After sharing our personal stories, we became more comfortable exploring the relationship between culture and performance. Even something as simple as the structure of language might create advantages or challenges to learning. A culturally appropriate response to authority can help or hurt, depending on the situation. Considering these ideas actually made us more aware of advantages and disadvantages we have encountered because of our own personal legacies.

As biological sciences majors, we rarely have the opportunity to read non-science books, but making the time to read *Outliers* was definitely worthwhile. We particularly enjoyed the fact that the book used compelling stories to show that many routes can lead to success. Many lessons from the stories can be applied to anybody aiming to reach a goal. However, trying to compare our potential success and our opportunities to those of Bill Gates was intimidating. What if we never encounter the opportunities that would make us an outlier? As much as we'd like to think that our success is in our own hands, it is disconcerting to realize just how much is up to chance.

The Professor's Perspective

Reading *Outliers* has fundamentally changed my attitude toward my students. It will probably do the same for you.

Many of us in the professoriate greet the sad stories we hear from our students with at least some degree of skepticism. The frequent coincidence of these stories with exams or term paper deadlines is no doubt partly to blame. However, while reading *Outliers*, I realized that my skepticism actually reflected my fundamental attitudes about success: if a student would just work hard enough—put in the necessary hours, read the textbook, work the sample problems, come to office hours—she would at least pass the course. These sad stories were just excuses for not devoting the intellectual sweat equity necessary to succeed.

Reading *Outliers* this semester helped me realize how simplistic, destructive, and just plain wrong this "anyone can be president if they just work hard enough" mentality is. What if a student simply doesn't know how to ask for help? What if a student's culture prevents her from questioning any authority figure, even someone as kind and welcoming as me? What if a student simply accepts my decision, even when he knows it isn't fair? Questions like this shouted to me at every turn of the page in *Outliers* and were simultaneously reinforced by my interactions with students this semester. For example, an anonymous student raged (with colorful, correctly spelled four-letter words) about the unfairness of my policy to give only partial credit for grading errors. However, this student's interpretation of my policy was completely incorrect; I (*of course!*) give full credit for any grading errors. It even says so in the syllabus. Yet, the only way I learned of this mistaken understanding was from an anonymous course evaluation. Why did this student not come to talk with me? More importantly, how many times have students who *did* take time to talk with me gained advantages over those who didn't? This question is important because Gladwell makes a good case that success results from accumulation of advantages. What advantages am I selectively giving to certain students?

Clearly (but sadly), two students working equally hard and with equivalent intelligence do not necessarily have the same chances for success. In his usual style, Gladwell illustrates this truth with the stories of two students. One literally tried to kill his teacher; the other was denied a valid request to take a class later in the day. Guess which one dropped out and which one went on to earn a Ph.D. in theoretical physics. The moral of these stories is that being able to fit in and "work the system" is as critical a determinant of success as is hard work or even genius. Working the system creates the advantages on which success lies. Because of the complex foundations of success, we need to be aware that trying to treat everyone in our classes the same is not the same as treating everyone fairly.

I was lucky to read *Outliers* with a group of thoughtful undergraduates (some of whom authored the first portion of this review). Their interesting perspectives greatly enhanced the impact of the book for me, providing hours of thoughtful conversation through the semester followed by reflection. Together, we explored the opportunities that have brought us to where we are today. Together, we struggled over the role of legacy in our success and that of others. As a result of this experience, I would highly recommend this book as a choice for a freshman seminar or an informal book club. It is one of those rare books that is incredibly interesting and easy to read, but also deals with profound issues that lend themselves to discussion.

In the end, I think that students came away from our discussions with more realistic ideas about success. I hope this knowledge will encourage them to work harder than they thought they should and to look for (and take advantage of) the opportunities that come their way. For my part, I came away with a new attitude toward my students. Rather than being the “excuse cop” who demands doctor’s excuses and proof of death to grant accommodations, I have decided to trust students at their word. Perhaps I will be taken advantage

of by an unscrupulous student or two. However, the potential for occasional misuse of my trust appears to be preferable to creating inadvertent and unfair roadblocks to the success of even one student. (When you read the Charles Langdon story in *Outliers*, I predict you will be at least sympathetic to this decision.) Something as simple as making accommodations for transportation restrictions may be all it takes to keep a student in school, heading for a college degree, and all the new opportunities for success that a college education brings.