



## Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry into the Nature and Implications of Expertise.

Bereiter, Carl and Marlene Scardamalia. La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1993.

### Book Digest

**Relevance:** For organizations charged with developing and refining professional expertise, this book challenges them to realign organizational policies, programs, and practices to foster the innovative thinking, attitudes, and practices that lead to true expertise.

**Publisher's Description:** *Expertise is a process of progressive problem-solving in which people continuously rethink and redefine their tasks. A future 'expert society' will not be a heaven in which all problems have disappeared, but a realistic utopia in which endless problem-solving will be a highly-valued part of life. Progressive problem solvers stay healthier, live longer, and experience the intense mental pleasure known as 'flow'. They repeatedly go beyond their well-learned procedures, avoid getting into ruts, and surpass themselves by reformulating problems at new and more complex levels. They are able to transform insoluble predicaments into soluble problems, to the benefit of everyone. **Yet many of our present institutions, especially schools, penalize expertise instead of cultivating it.** [bold added for emphasis]*

**Discussion:** For professional military education (PME) institutions and other professional schools, that last statement should peak curiosity. How the learning environment and curricula are structured influences the possibility for expertise formation and growth. The authors assert that most schools\* are nonexpert societies, designed and structured to produce nonexpert learners, those more comfortable with “carr[ying] out practiced routines. Often these routines are carried out very well and are effective in a majority of cases. It is only when the routines fail ... that the difference between experts and nonexperts becomes manifest” (11). Despite the passage of time, much seems unchanged, as the authors have addressed similar education deficiencies in subsequent publications. Schools and classrooms *can* be transformed into learning environments that support the process of developing expertise through reorienting the school environment into a knowledge building community. What does this look like? It is a “social environment in which progress or growth is a continuing requirement of adaption to the environment” (244), that highly emphasizes progressive discourse (208) and the sharing of expertise (227) and where there are collective ideal goals (225) to which everyone is contributing (226) and the “rewards for contributions are intrinsic to the social process” (226). The goal posts move as the collective advances knowledge creation and new goals (or problems) emerge, previously unseen and now unmasked due to progress (226).

This necessitates a very different classroom setting, curricula, and instructional role, which PME institutions are ideally situated to foster and provide. The authors note that such social environments are much better suited to maintain and deepen expertise (106). Professionals of arms come to PME schools with a level of knowledge, upon which the institutions and instructors can build, and the instructors at Marine Corps PME institutions already are familiar with constructivist education theories that place instructors more as guides and facilitators and students in the driver's seat of their collective learning. Creating a learning culture that fosters, not stifles, progressive discourse that challenges the boundaries of the known regularizes creative expertise as a professional expectation and allows it to thrive. Not that everyone should or will be an expert, as not everyone will be. However, it is like a democratic society. “We call a society democratic if it functions according to democratic processes. This it can do even if a number of its members are not personally inclined toward democracy” (225). The authors offer examples of practices and activities throughout the text that foster and inhibit such environments that could be useful for PME institutions and other professional schools.

\* The authors focus their discourse mainly on K-12 schools to address a major deficit in early development of expert-like learners. However, their criticism of educational practices and learning environments extends beyond that to include universities.

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