

## **Make the Rules! – Don't Just Do What Everyone Else Does**

Donald W. Mitchell

If you ask most young people about what they are learning, they will make an unpleasant face. Even those who enjoy learning will often pretend that they don't. Why? The youthful ideal is to float through life without a care in the world . . . and if you can't do that, to at least pretend to be carefree.

Under the surface of that real or pretended insouciance, young people are usually learning a lot about how to succeed and to demonstrate mastery of what "adults" do by following the examples and rules around them. As a result, young people can become overly focused on aping what everyone else does who appears to be successful.

Whenever I see an example of conforming, I'm reminded of a story that a friend of mine shared with me about a guild of assassins. New assassins were granted insights into a few of the rules that aided success. If they applied those lessons well, the young assassins would be promoted to a higher level where a few more secret rules would be shared. This process continued for many years. One day, someone made it the highest level of assassins. The head of the guild leaned forward and whispered the ultimate rule into the ear of the newly promoted assassin: "There are no rules."

With mastery of any activity, people can reach the understanding needed to see beyond the limits of arbitrary rules so that more can be accomplished. While some will deny the value of having any rules, we all need some signposts . . . especially when we are new to an activity. So it can be valuable to have rules . . . even if they are only useful to beginners or for making cooperation easier.

Let's look at the lessons that such insights into rules can bring to a person's life by considering Dr. Adam D'Amato-Neff's life. His dad was a captain in the U.S. Air Force and was a strict parent about following rules. Such strictness is not surprising given that following rules is essential to performing well as an air force officer. Although there were lots of moves, each of Dr. D'Amato-Neff's siblings developed a strong sense that there were definite rules governing life.

However, as a youngster Dr. D'Amato-Neff found himself drawn to less structured activities that often encouraged creativity in applying rules. As a young teen, for instance, he loved to play Dungeons and Dragons and various computer games. Some karate black belts also gave him lessons in martial arts. In high school, he wrote poetry and drafted material that later became part of a novel, *Golden Rattle*.

Because he had no clear plan for a career, college was a time to explore many enjoyable activities including fencing, karate, and archery when not dissecting cadavers as part of his anthropology assignments. Nearing graduation, he joined the U.S. Army in 1991 as an Operating Room Specialist (someone who assists surgeons), a new direction for his anatomical interests.

Dr. D'Amato-Neff quickly discovered that army rules could be bizarre. He spent as much time cutting grass and waxing floors as he did working in an operating room. For fun, he took lots of correspondence courses to build his operating room technical skills.

Part-time activities also included playing the harmonica and recording CDs with several bands, writing a karate manual, and publishing several of his novels and a book of poetry.

After spending four years in four different locations, he left the army and began taking more college courses. Unexpectedly discovering that he loved psychology, he continued to study in that field, earning a B.S. degree which was soon followed by an M.A. in Industrial Organizational psychology.

Inspired by his love of martial arts in which he earned several black belts, he founded a karate school that combined several varieties of martial arts into a new discipline. By teaching at a local private school, he avoided overhead costs and earned an hourly rate higher than what most lawyers were charging in those days. As a martial arts expert, he was able to set his own rules and those rules served him and his students quite well.

In 2002, Dr. D'Amato-Neff moved to Albany with his wife and growing family but could not find a research job. He quickly added some more education, this time taking a two-year degree in computer networking.

He had always loved computers and had done some consulting work in this area before: Why not continue in this area full time?

In 2004, he began to look for a Ph.D. program, which seemed to him to be the next logical step in his continuing education, and selected Rushmore University (an online school) for his studies. He chose Rushmore because he already had four degrees from traditional bricks and mortar schools and really wanted to earn a doctorate: But with four young children and a busy full-time job, he needed the flexibility that individual tutorials with professors at Rushmore would provide and wanted to keep his time commitments and costs down. He was particularly pleased that Rushmore's rules allowed him to avoid the long hours of boring lectures that so many doctoral programs require. As a veteran author, he also wanted to create a definitive book on information systems management for making strategic changes in health care organizations based on his Ph.D. writings.

The flexible rules served him well: Dr. D'Amato-Neff could choose his own courses. As a result, when his interests shifted during his Rushmore studies, he was able to delve into new areas of interest.

Through a lot of concentrated effort, Dr. D'Amato-Neff was able to earn his Ph.D. in 2006. He still plans to write the book about information systems management and intends to continue with his personal studies and writing.

His career received a boost from the degree. After graduating, he initially consulted for large organizations, adding to his knowledge and experience. Later, he took a new job with the New York State government and continued with part-time consulting. He described the education as having been a "great lens that helped me focus my energy toward more specific goals and continues to guide me in my every day successes."

Now that Dr. D'Amato-Neff has reached the highest level of academic achievement, he knows what rules should apply and where there should be no rules. I asked him to share with you the lessons for those considering an online Ph.D. degree. Here is what he had to say:

"This format really requires one to have true initiative and self dedication; the teacher isn't going to harp at you for not turning in your homework. I say this partly in jest, but it's true.

“You need to know what you want and go for it. You need to set personal goals and strive toward them. Your advisor can help guide you, and there is support to help you in your writing, but ultimately (just like anything in life) the responsibility falls on you.

“If you are willing to make the effort to pursue your dreams, Rushmore will help you achieve them.”

Let me leave you with these questions:

1. Where are rules interfering with you having a more satisfying, successful life?
2. Are you ready to consider that those rules might not be right for you?
3. How can you gain the expertise to make your own rules?

Copyright 2008 Donald W. Mitchell, All Rights Reserved

Donald W. Mitchell is a professor at Rushmore University. For more information about ways to engage in fruitful lifelong learning at Rushmore to increase your effectiveness, visit

<http://www.rushmore.edu> .