

A Seat at the Table

A Problem-Based Learning Event for the MT Engage Summer Institute
May, 2018

Today I had lunch at Sylvan Park restaurant. It's a small "meat and three" restaurant in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. The layout of the tables in the dining area is such that everyone is seated close together. It's impossible not to overhear conversations at the nearby tables, and today I overheard one that made my ears perk up.

The restaurant appeals to people from all walks of life, from blue collar workers in work clothes to professionals in business attire. The table next to me, only a couple of feet from my elbow, was occupied by four men. When they first came in I had noticed that they wore nice clothes – dress shirts, ties, slacks, the whole thing. Right away I figured that they were professionals of some sort. But it was their conversation that really stood out to me. "The students that come from MTSU are just not prepared to go to work for me," one complained. "I had one that couldn't even read a spreadsheet of my monthly P and L, much less create a spreadsheet using Xcel – you know, one that can generate charts and graphs. When I asked her about it she said that the university didn't teach that. I don't get it. What are they teaching them over there?"

"I know what you mean," chimed in another. "Not only do I have to train them to read my lab instruments, but they don't seem to have the same attitude about work that I had when I got my start. I have to monitor them all the time to make sure that they get their work done and done right."

The conversation continued along those lines, with one after the other talking about how MTSU students were "not used to working until the job was done," or "taking too much time off," or "dressing unprofessionally." One fellow said that the students just didn't seem to understand how to function in the workplace. "I can't give them any important tasks to do, because they don't know how to work together with other workers," he stated. "And forget about leadership skills," another complained. "They can't lead. They want me to tell them exactly what to do."

One man mused, "I should have known better when I hired the last one. He didn't even have a professional looking résumé. But he seemed like a nice kid, and he graduated with honors, so I took a chance. I still think he's a nice kid, and I think he'll be okay eventually, once I get him trained in how to put together a professional ad proposal. But I wish he had those skills already!"

I have to admit that I was perplexed and a little put out. I wanted to speak up and defend our programs of study, because I know very well that we do teach these skills. But it would have been rude to interrupt their lunch, and besides, I thought, "Their perception is their reality." I left the restaurant wondering what I could do to change their perceptions. And I was worried, too. What if I had an even harder task to do? What if I had to change the reality as well?