

## Learning like Lincoln

The history of the United States of America is full of influential people that have shaped and molded what the country is today. In the classroom, these individuals are studied for what they did, but not for how they did it or what put them in the position to do it. In *A Passion for Learning: The Education of Seven Eminent Americans*, Philip Cusick examines how seven influential American figures put themselves in to a position to shape America. Cusick's focus is on education, and how these Americans took education as a personal matter, an interior affair. Cusick identifies several "pillars" that the eminent Americans have in common. One of the eminent Americans Cusick discusses is Abraham Lincoln **who exemplifies the "pillar" of relationships**. Lincoln demonstrates that by surrounding himself with like-minded friends, colleagues, mentors, and rivals to share knowledge and ideas with, they promoted learning and furthered his education until his death.

Abraham Lincoln was born in to a low class family with little means for social advancement. Lincoln grew up in a time when the only mode for climbing the social ladder was education. In order to improve his social standing Lincoln surrounded himself with individuals that would only enhance his understanding and continue his education, as informal as it may be. It began with the encouragement of his mother and then step-mother and then when his family moved to Illinois he began to study law. He read and taught himself law (with the help of mentors that he became friends with) and eventually began practicing in 1836. The interactive timeline, as a part of the *Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum*, displays several relationships that Lincoln had with lawyers, which demonstrates the importance of relationships in his professional growth. The *Abraham Lincoln Research Site* offers further documentation of his relationships by stating that Lincoln was rarely, if ever, without a law partner. By surrounding himself with like-minded lawyers (especially on his travelling on the Eighth District Circuit), Lincoln was able to enhance his learning of Illinois state law and national politics of the time.

As Lincoln's law career developed in Springfield, he also met and began a relationship with Mary Todd. As pointed out by Gerald Prokopowicz in a video on the website *Lincoln/net*, Lincoln was drawn to Todd because of her political awareness. Todd became a friend and eventually a life partner that Lincoln could "talk politics with". Lincoln and Todd built their relationship on the basis that they could have intelligent conversations with each other. When Lincoln becomes President, Mary Todd Lincoln continues to share knowledge and enhance the education of Lincoln.

In the 1850's, Lincoln decided to run for Senate. In the 1858 election, Lincoln found himself against Stephen Douglas, pioneer of Popular Sovereignty. Lincoln challenged Douglas to debates throughout Illinois. In doing so, Lincoln surrounded himself with yet another individual that furthered his education of national politics and oratory skills. Prior to the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Lincoln was not a national figure and he did not have his ideas on slavery defined. As pointed out by Eric Foner in a video on *Lincoln/net*, Lincoln became a national figure as a result of the debates. He also becomes a leader (another one of Cusick's "pillars") for anti-expansion of slavery in to the territories. Douglas represents Lincoln's "counterplayer", as defined by Erik Erickson, during these debates. Lincoln defined his ideas and practices around Douglas and possibly gained a better understanding of himself.

During Lincoln's presidency, he built a Cabinet of his political opponents from the Republican Nomination Convention. The site, *Abraham Lincoln's Classroom* (under *President Lincoln's Cabinet*), highlights the how Lincoln's Cabinet, while a group of rivals, worked through one of the most difficult times in American history. This team of rivals, to borrow a term from Doris Kearns Goodwin, enhanced

the education of Lincoln in aspects of politics, war, and international relations. When Lincoln found no other educational uses for these men, he replaced them with individuals that would benefit his education on how to effectively run a nation.

Philip Cusick identified Abraham Lincoln as one of seven eminent Americans that was extraordinary in a time of mostly ordinary people. Lincoln possessed the ability and intelligence to place himself amongst friends, colleagues, mentors, and rivals that continued his education in adulthood and through one of the most trying times in American history. This makes Lincoln even more important to teach in classrooms, not because of what he did, but how he did it, by creating relationships with like-minded, knowledgeable, and serious learners.