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Kimberly Witte

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Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World
David Epstein (Riverhead Books 2019), 339 pages

Kimberly Witte, reviewer

In *Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World*, author David Epstein presents a powerful and captivating argument for the importance of dynamic and broad learning. Epstein, a New York Times best-selling author who has worn many other hats in his lifetime, from podcast host to ecologist, qualifies as the perfect storyteller to convey the significance of taking a general approach in a “wicked world.” In this award-winning book, Epstein contests the belief that excellence comes as a result of early specialization and challenges readers to thoughtfully consider the benefits of learning to be a generalist.

Range explores the benefits of developing skills and knowledge through a broad approach to learning and life. Epstein directly presents arguments to deconstruct the notion that success can only be achieved through early specialization. He weaves together data and testimonies to tell a captivating story supporting a generalized approach for future excellence. After demonstrating how well-researched examples have achieved success through breadth and exploring opportunities, Epstein advises readers on how they, too, might take a general route to shine in an increasingly specialized world.

True to the subject, this book is relevant to a range of readers and provides interdisciplinary insights. Epstein draws examples and relevant takeaways from numerous fields, including sports, science, and the arts, to provide further insight into why the generalist approach is most successful in an unpredictable world. Anyone interested in learning, teaching, success, and personal development will glean valuable insights from the journey Epstein takes readers on in *Range*.

As the celebrated author of two award-winning books, a former senior writer at *Sports Illustrated*, as well as a former reporter at *ProPublica*, David Epstein had a varied journey to finding the career he loves. Yet again, Epstein's own testimony adds greater depth to the case he makes for generalization and "flirting with your possible selves."

Before delving deep into his case for generalization, Epstein makes a connection with James Flynn, a professor of political studies who conducted research related to societal advancements in conceptual classification schemes. In conjunction with these advancements, however, Flynn discovered (much to his "great disappointment") that "society, and particularly higher education, has responded to the broadening of the mind by pushing specialization, rather than focusing early training on conceptual, transferable knowledge." Epstein explores these discoveries further, interpreting what Flynn found his results to mean. He also confesses that in his route to specialization, he personally experienced the negative effects of specialized thinking, which is what caused Flynn's work to resonate so deeply with Epstein.

Later in *Range*, Epstein also discloses his selection as a participant in the Dark Horse Project, a research study on successful people who "followed what seemed like an unusual path," once again reaffirming his personal experience in taking a broad route in life. His inclusion in this study also gave Epstein the opportunity to increase his understanding of the benefits of later (or no) specialization. Not only does Epstein take the time to let readers see the deep well of investigative research which was carefully reviewed and assembled to illustrate the urgent need for generalization, but he also offers himself as a testimony to the importance of breadth. As someone who has personal experience and a stake in generalized thinking, learning, and development, Epstein is uniquely qualified to help readers understand how to transform their perspective to be more generalized.

Range explores a variety of key themes, each supported by interdisciplinary examples. All subsequent arguments, however, hinge on the central point of the book: generalists draw from a broader set of experiences and knowledge which is just as, if not more, important as specialization. Rather than proving his argument by presenting lists of data and research, Epstein masterfully weaves scientific facts within testimonies that support his claim. The strongest example Epstein presents is a comparison of two sports legends: Tiger Woods and Roger Federer. Many people are familiar with Woods' success story, as he became an prime example for parents to instill early specialization in their children. Epstein recounts Woods' success story, as a toddler who won his first golf tournament in the ten-and-under division at just two years old. As the rest of his story plays out, there is no denying that Woods' talent was developed at an early age, which helped him excel and stand out as he continued in his golfing career.

Epstein then contrasts this with another famous success story. Unlike Woods, Roger Federer experimented with many different sports and deferred early advancement and specialization to stay with his friends and continue playing the array of sports he enjoyed. Epstein writes that Federer, "Would later give credit to the wide range of sports he played for helping him develop his athleticism and hand-eye coordination." Federer's so-called "late start" enabled him to hold the number one world ranking for tennis, even into his thirties when tennis players typically retire.

Epstein tied these stories together as he explored research studies being conducted globally that were finding late specialization, after athletes took a sampling period to try multiple sports, to be a key factor in athletic success. There was a common belief amongst all sports communities that success could only come from the type of early specialization and devotion

exhibited in Woods' story. However, the rise of successful athletes, along with new research, was proving the exact opposite; Federer's success story wasn't an anomaly.

Although Epstein's research started as a sports-centric question, it began to expand rapidly as he continued to dig deeper. Epstein writes that as his research broadened, he "encountered remarkable individuals who succeeded not in spite of their range of experiences and interests, but because of it."

To further support his argument, Epstein delves into psychological research and presents the concept that we live in a "wicked world," one that requires us to have "the ability to apply knowledge to new situations." In a kind learning environment, highly specialized thinking is developed through experience, such as the thinking developed by chess masters and firefighters who encounter patterns. But as the world progresses in complexity, that thinking is becoming outdated. While societal intelligence has increased as the world has become increasingly interconnected, the gravitation towards specialization prevents the "conceptual reasoning skills that can connect new ideas and work across contexts" that the "wicked world demands." After establishing the groundwork for his argument, Epstein then moves into secondary claims that link closely with the concept of expanding one's range.

After presenting compelling research that challenges early specialization, Epstein takes his point one step further to make an intrapersonal connection. As people change throughout the years, Epstein argues, there is greater benefit in "flirting with your possible selves," rather than being chained to a long-term plan. A range of knowledge is gained in this exploratory journey, which will then be an aid at the final destination.

Epstein discusses the current societal tendency to "groundhog," or to focus deeply on one area of study without paying attention to developments being made elsewhere. In the

introductory argument he presents for a more generalist approach, he writes, “Everyone is digging deeper into their own trench and rarely standing up to look in the next trench over, even though the solution to their problem happens to reside there.”

In the chapter “The Outsider Advantage,” problems posed by NASA and the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill crisis were discussed, as monumental solutions were discovered by people who had no direct experience with the discipline at hand; they were able to apply outside knowledge to address the root of complex issues. As range expands, it becomes more natural to make interdisciplinary connections to provide solutions or ask deeper questions. Many other examples show how an interdisciplinary approach to problems yields better and more efficient solutions.

In the pursuit of interdisciplinarity, there is also an expansion of transferrable skills. Epstein argues that range provides a much-needed adaptable skill set, allowing for greater success in various situations. Even if those skills are only uni- or multidisciplinary in nature, all the examples provided show that a large breadth of skills serves as a solid foundation for enhanced performance and adaptability within a specific domain.

After understanding the research and believing the testimonies, it is clear that Epstein’s argument for range extends beyond the theoretical. As people in a “wicked world,” expanding breadth of knowledge will only lead to greater collaboration and overall societal success. Epstein challenges his readers to drop the “one-size-fits-all” mentality and embrace the experiment of broadening personal range.

Although Epstein presents a masterful case for becoming a generalist, offering compelling research and a variety of examples, he leaves readers without action steps. In proving the need for generalist thinking, he points out the modern trend for specialization within parenting, education, and the workforce. The entirety of *Range* serves as a call to action,

however, readers are left with little advice on how to correct this tendency or help the next generation become broad learners. While there are many lessons to be gleaned by delving into the examples Epstein presents, providing an action plan of how change could be ignited in the life of the reader would be a welcome contribution to Epstein's writing.

Epstein's research, presented as a rallying cry for change and development, ends with a reassurance that, "There is nothing inherently wrong with specialization. We all specialize to one degree or another, at some point or another." *Range* reinforces the great potential that comes from embracing breadth in learning in order to navigate the complexities of the modern world.

As I read through *Range*, I found myself reading out loud to my father one afternoon, who was curious about what I was learning in class. After I had finished reading, we started to discuss the content. He was very curious about the topic and reflected on the chapter we had just finished which discussed using analogies as a useful tool for framing problems. My father told me that's how his mind had always worked; pulling connections from one experience to another and problem-solving in abstract ways. "What an intricate thing each mind is," he said, "and how beautiful to know it has been shaped and is deeply known by our Creator."

After he made this comment, I began my own reflection. Growing up, I could never answer the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" I often found it irritating and discouraging that I was interested in so many different things, yet not deeply passionate about any one thing. From winning state science fair competitions to running up and down the sidelines taking pictures at a football game, I used high school as a time to invest in my different interests and expand my range, even if I didn't know the benefit of it at the time.

As I entered college, I switched my major before I even arrived on campus for my freshman year. Even after a major switch, I still had a double minor and used every free elective

course to sit in various classes that interested me (apologetics, social problems, philosophy, etc.). When I finally made the jump to an interdisciplinary degree, it was with a lot of fear, prayer, and even insecurity.

Reading through *Range* has provided a level of comfort to me as an interdisciplinarian. Epstein, as a masterful writer who not only approaches the subject of range but demonstrates it in his work, shows throughout this book that there is nothing wrong with being a generalist, taking time to find your passion, or even switching your career as you continue to change. From chapter to chapter, I found myself within what he wrote by understanding in a deeper way how my own mind works and why it's possible for me to be interested in so many different things. Now, I find myself encouraged to continue seeking ways to broaden my range in my studies and as I take steps forward towards a career.

Whether you have considered yourself an interdisciplinarian for years, are wanting to learn more now, or have never heard of the term before, *Range* provides a wealth of insights that will benefit any person in any stage of life. I highly recommend you take the time to read this work and allow the author to challenge you to think deeply and take action to expand your range in life.

REVIEWER BIO

Kimberly is a student at Liberty University who will be graduating with honors from the Interdisciplinary Studies Program in May 2024. Her interdisciplinary degree has concentrations in Fine Arts and Business, with an emphasis in Graphic Design and Digital Media. During her time at Liberty, she served on campus leadership teams as a Community Group Leader and

Resident Assistant, was a project manager for the Liberty University's student-led design agency, Open Quote Creative, and a member of the university's National Student Advertising Competition team.