Unschooling and Academic Education 1

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 5 January, 2006 - 14:05

The implication of saying that there are things children must learn to study is that the children may not want to learn them, because they won't know that they are valuable until later. But if you can't enumerate them all, then how do you know, when you are forcing your children to do one of them, that you are not preventing your children from doing another? Also, if you can't enumerate them all, how do you think the children are going to learn the ones you are unable to enumerate? In fact, I believe that not only can you not enumerate them all, but you can't KNOW them all, that you can't even know a millionth part of them.

Posted on the Learning list (a radical unschooling list which unfortunately no longer exists) on Mon, 24 Oct., 1994, at 19:18:22+0000

by **Sarah Fitz-Claridge (http://www.fitz-claridge.com/)**

A poster wrote:

> *In an earlier post, I raised the question of reconciling unschooling from a philosophical (pro-freedom) basis with having high academic aspirations. [Some posters] questioned whether there is any conflict between the two motives.*

Whose aspirations? If you mean *your* aspirations for your children, then these two things are not reconcilable. It is, however, possible to have high academic aspirations in the sense that one can believe that children can achieve excellence in academic subjects under non-coercive education, and one can imagine that if one has interests of the high academic type oneself, that one's children could become interested in them too. But they are not aspirations in the sense that one would think that something must be going wrong if the children do not become interested in them too, or that one would try to *make* the children follow those interests.

> *In part it depends on how you define unschooling. I would like to consider both "radical unschooling" and "child-directed learning." Let me first say what I mean by "radical unschooling." I use it to refer to the view that says that teaching is either irrelevant or inimical to "real" learning.*

I agree that teaching is either irrelevant or inimical to real learning, but probably not in the way you imply. I see it as simply a factual matter: it usually *is,* that's all. But where the subject is such that teaching is a good way of learning, as in driving instructing or parachuting perhaps, then teaching is *not* inimical to learning.

This view is expressed in various forms by most of the proponents of unschooling. They advocate learning by doing and support apprenticeship over instruction. Often they reject as artificial the fragmentation of knowledge into subject areas. They tend to see learning as something that just happens,

"Just happens" is not a paraphrase of the preceding statements.

and see no point in studying methods of instruction.

I certainly see no point in studying methods of instruction, unless you happen to be a driving instructor or a parachuting instructor perhaps.

Some say that teaching inherently imposes an interpretation on reality

I would not criticise teaching by saying that it imposes an interpretation on reality, because *all* interaction imposes an interpretation on reality.

They often say children are natural learning machines, claiming that the ability to learn is an intrinsic part of any child's psyche

Children are indeed natural learning machines but that does not mean they can do it by themselves.

(at least until teaching destroys it).

It is coercion that destroys it, not teaching per se.

They tend to feel that only the child can know what matters to him.

I agree that only the child knows what matters to him. (Had you said that only the child knows what is *good* for him, I would have added "in the event of a dispute.")

In extreme moments, their view of the learning process is quite mystical – they treat it as an unanalysable interaction between each individual person and the universe as a whole.

It is rather un-analysable – or at least, it is not possible to anticipate or predict by guesswork – because it is a creative process, so there is no mechanical way of predicting it or directing it, but that does not make it mystical.

> *Child-directed learning is a much less radical view. The central idea is that learning comes from interest and that once a student is interested in something, any of a variety of methods of study may be appropriate.*

I agree with this, except that as a matter of fact I think that teaching is very rarely a good method for people. I am not *opposed* to it.

> *The CDL view is more tolerant of subject fragmentation. It is generally less hostile to study of method, though the treatment tends to be wholly pragmatic: they merely say that different methods work for different people. Parents using CDL seem willing to do what they can to inspire interest in things the parents think are important*

There are two different senses in which one might say that parents can think something is important in this context. Parents can either hold some educational theory that takes a position that certain things are important for children in the abstract, like mathematics or physical education, for example. That inevitably leads to coercion. On the other hand, if by "inspiring interest" you mean just doing what any thinking person does to any other thinking person – namely to try to interest them in exciting things – then we do and indeed must try to inspire interest in our children, in what we think is interesting.

> *but tend to agree with the radicals in feeling that the child is the best judge of what matters to the child.*

I don't like your use of the denigrating word "feeling" here. It is not that I *feel* that the child is the best judge of what matters to him, it is that I have a *theory* that he does. It is not a feeling. It is possible to have the theory long before one has the feeling.

> *I believe the radical view has many problems. Radical unschoolers make a serious error when they take the view that learning is something that "just happens."*

By your definitions, I am more of a radical unschooler than a child-directed learning advocate, although I do not really agree with either of your two definitions, and I certainly don't think that learning is something that "just happens."

> *Gaining conceptual knowledge is volitional, but it is not automatic. By that I mean that desire is necessary for learning, but it is not sufficient.*

Desire is also necessary for *eating,* and parents have to provide the food, but not only the food: they have to provide *nice* food, and theories about food – lots of them. Only then can the child eat well.

> *Learning is a process that requires a specific means, and participating in formal instruction is one of the best methods known to acquire a large amount of knowledge in a small amount of time.*

You do not mean knowledge but rather, information. It may be true that formal instruction might be a good way to acquire a large amount of information or it may not be. A friend of mine tells an anecdote that seems to refute the idea that this is necessarily the best way. He was not prepared to do a particular course that was in theory required by his university. Instead, he studied things he did feel interested in. But then there were some discoveries in the field, which my friend found very exciting. Suddenly, he found that in order to understand something he wanted to understand, he had to know the subject of the course he had refused to do. So he got a book, and within a couple of days, learned the course. Not only that, but he thinks that if he had done the course, he would still have had to get that book out of the library and read it in exactly the same way, because he would not have actually grasped what he needed to know. So all those weeks and weeks of boring work would not have saved him that couple of days' work (which he greatly enjoyed anyway).

People writing on the internet have sometimes suggested that children must be forced to learn various things in order to give them the chance to get into high academic fields later on. I suggest that it is not true that children will be handicapped by not being forced to acquire any particular information, and it is not true that years and years of formal courses are necessary for anyone wishing to pursue high academic subjects.

But suppose that we are not talking about fully non-coercive parents who fully engage with their children, and who are willing to devote huge amounts of effort to their children's interests and wishes. Suppose we are talking about your average home educating parent, who for some reason takes the view that it is not necessary for their children to learn maths, say. And suppose that the reason why they think this is that they themselves are rather alienated from society and society's values, from science, from the notion of progress, from the notion of truth in general, and that not making their children do this is part of their own therapy for exorcising the ghost from their own minds. Then in that case, I think that it is true that the children will suffer.

It is quite possible that under those circumstances the parents will succeed in passing their own hang-ups onto their children but without passing on to them any alternative way of making a living, so the children might end up in a worse position than the parents. The parents were messed up psychologically, but received “in compensation” a method of earning a living. It could be that their peculiar way of dealing with this will result in their children having the same hang-ups but without any means of earning a living. Suppose that when the children try to take seriously some abstract issue, these parents give them the message that they should really be gambolling about in the garden, or that this can't possibly work, that it is ridiculous for them to be trying to solve the mysteries of the world, that there is no solution to anything and that one must just cease the moment or whatever. Suppose also that the children are not given *practical* help – that if they see a famous person on television and want to ask the person a burning question, the parents do not, say, phone the person up or help the children write a letter to him or whatever. Then the children will indeed suffer.

Now a non-unschooler might look at such a family and point out that the children are never likely to gain any academic knowledge, and it is true that one could put this down to the fact that the children are not forced to study any academic subjects; but what is wrong with those parents is not that they don't force the children to study, it is that they don't engage with the children, and they don't take enough precautions to make sure that they don't pass on their own hang-ups. However, it may be that the parents are doing the only thing they can possibly do, given their psychological hang-ups. But if we are talking about what is possible or impossible for parents to do, we are now talking about a different subject from educational theory.

> *I find it telling that one of the classic stories in the unschooling tradition is the math-learning tale recently retold ...about the Sudbury Valley (un) School. As I recall this story, some children decided that they were bored with playing all day and wanted to really learn arithmetic. The staff tried (half-seriously) to talk them out of it, but the children responded with even more eagerness and they relented. The school offered formal instruction, with textbooks, a rigid schedule, and serious homework. The students enthusiastically agreed, and were able to learn the entire body of the normal elementary math curriculum in some small number of weeks. Unschoolers tell stories like this over and over without realising that it is just as much a testimonial for formal instruction as it is for unschooling. The story combines the best elements of both worlds. The desire came from the children, but the organisation, schedule, and conceptual structure came from the adult. People really wanted to learn and the way they did it was to go to a teacher.*

It is possible that in the context of this unschool, children who wanted to learn mathematics could best do so by having lessons. That however is no sort of testimonial for having lessons. The children should not have been in a school in the first place, whether or not it is an unschool, and even if they *were* in a school, the fact that teachers were offering them this formal instruction as their only outlet for this impulse, does not prove that there are not outlets which are infinitely better than this. For instance, if they had considered this important, and, say, found a graduate student to come in to the school to talk to the children for a few hours a week, then they would have been able to do without formal instruction, and the children would have learned even more.

I have spent much of my adult life learning academic things, and I very rarely have done so by going to a teacher. My learning often involves other people, and indeed, it would be unusual for me to do this just by reading books, say, but there is an enormous difference between having a chat with someone and being taught in a formal manner, in a class or tutorial, say. Normally, I just go to have a chat with somebody, and they tell me a few things and answer a few questions, then I go away, think about what they have said, then maybe go back to them with further questions. I read books and attend the odd lecture, and may or may not talk about these with people. The only lectures I have ever got anything out of have been the ones I have chosen to go to, and even then, often, I have fallen asleep or been unable to take in a single word. The reason I go to lectures at all is not because I think I might learn something at the time, but because when I go to lectures, I meet interesting, creative people (such as the speakers) with whom I can, at some later date, have some good conversations in which I do learn things.

Attending a class or tutorial is the very last thing I'd do, unless I were learning to drive, for example. But even then, I might not: a while ago, a friend of mine took me for a jolly to France in his light aircraft. On the way back, he casually taught me how to fly it, and answered all my questions about navigation and air traffic control conventions. When we returned, I flew and landed the plane myself, with merely his few casual tips and answers to my questions. It was not formal instruction at all, and yet one would think that these kinds of skills would require formal instruction, wouldn't one?

> *It is easy to see that there is structure to mathematics, and that instruction (through lecture or reading) is the only practical way to absorb the vast body of knowledge that has been created.*

That is just false. You say “through lecture or reading,” but reading does not have these properties. If you mean reading a book which has been organised into lessons, no one ever reads a book spontaneously in that way: one dips into a book; one finds the things one wants to read about; one goes backwards; one interprets it as one goes along.

> *You can't just leave a child to play with Cuisinaire rods and expect them to deduce the Pythagorean theorem.*

You seem to be saying that either one has instruction, which as you say, involves organisation, schedule, and conceptual structure [coming] from the adult” *or* one has the child playing with Cuisinaire rods and one expects him to deduce the Pythagorean theorem; but I want neither of those two things. This is a false dichotomy. A home educated teenager just asked me a whole load of deep philosophical questions about whether there might be an externally justifiable reason to live and so on, and I talked with him about it. That was not a lesson, it was a conversation. It does not amount to me leaving him to play with bits of paper, say; on the contrary, it allowed absolutely open access to me, and it was completely unscheduled, unorganised, and had no conceptual structure coming from me. The only thing that was there was that we had a mutual interest in the subject, and I was available to discuss it with him. *Those* things are essential, but not all this formal stuff.

What is harder to see (and what many radical unschoolers outright reject) is that there is structure to learning itself.

I agree that there is indeed structure to learning, in that there are reasons intrinsic to a subject why one can only learn things in a certain order.

Some types of learning *are* fairly automatic – any healthy young child will pick up language. Reasoning has to be learned, and it is far from automatic. Children need to learn how to learn.

On the contrary, babies learn language in exactly the same underlying way anyone learns anything. If children are not born able to learn, how would they learn? How would they "learn to learn" as you put it? I do accept that they do learn meta knowledge, but the underlying logic of learning is the same.

They need to learn that there is structure to knowledge, and that they can learn more by reading than by doing, but that not everything they read is true. They need to learn the laws of logic, from the laws of identity and non-contradiction to the long lists of fallacies.

How many adults know these things consciously?

They need to learn the difference between induction and deduction, and between hearsay and fact.

I'd say that they (and you!) need to learn that there is no such thing as induction (but perhaps that is a topic for a philosophy list?).

They need to learn that sometimes you have to slog through the dull parts of a book to get to something really worth knowing.

I am not sure about this. It is a bit like saying that children must learn that learning to ride a bicycle is necessarily painful. You seem to be saying that there are some parts of subjects that are intrinsically boring (for instance, you might think that arithmetic is boring but that one has to be able to do that in order to understand calculus). That is not true. All the parts of subjects that have any substance were invented by people who invented them because they wanted to, so all one has to do is see it their way, and one will find the intrinsic interest one thinks does not exist. And what is more, the inventors had to put hundreds of times more effort into it than anyone studying these things *now* will.

They need to learn that some things simply must be memorised, so that the conscious mind can focus on the next higher level of abstraction.

That is simply false. It depends what you mean by "memorised" but one *will* remember things one learns about. If it is not possible to focus on the next higher level of abstraction without first learning the lower stuff, then that is what will happen – the child will be learning the lower stuff – so what is the problem? Or is it that what this is really all about is making the children study what we think is important? Why else would we be thinking in terms of getting them memorising lower things?

Lest you think I am attacking a straw man, let me quote John Holt, who wrote in Teach your Own, "Intelligence, as I wrote in How Children Fail, is not the measure of how much we know how to do, but of how we behave when we don't know what to do. It has to do with our ability to think up important questions and then to find ways to get useful answers. It is not a trick that can be taught, nor does it need to be. We are born with it, and if our other deep animal needs are fairly well satisfied, and we have reasonable access to the world around us, we will put it to work on that world." (It is not the best quote expressing that view, but it does happen to be in the one Holt book near at hand. ;-)

This is what I call the intrinsic view of learning. What it does is to confuse the sort of nearly automatic learning that an infant performs with the sort of conceptual learning that an older child or adult needs. When the time comes to solve problems "when we don't know what to do," there is most definitely value in studying problem-solving.

There is value in studying problem-solving, in my opinion, but what you seem to be saying through all this, is that there are things whose value is not obvious, and that the value of such a thing only comes later, when one is learning other things. But that is just tantamount to saying that reason does not work – that the value of things cannot be judged by reason but can only be judged by appeal to authority. If there is value in studying problem-solving, then people who value it will expose their children to the theory that it is valuable to study problem-solving, and this will take its place among all the other theories that the children have got. The children will pick and choose between those theories, and accept some, reject others, and so on. So saying that there is value in studying this thing, has no bearing on educational practices unless one thinks that the children won't agree that it has this value unless one forces them. If they will agree that it has this value *without* being forced, then there is no great discussion between us, except that I don't think that you can *know* what that value is – it is only your opinion – but I don't think there is anything wrong with your children adopting that particular idea any more than I think there is a problem with them adopting any other idea, so long as they do it rationally, by their own choice.

You don't just sit around thinking until some solution presents itself – you have to think about it, and to think clearly you have to use specific means which must be learned (and perhaps can be taught).

What are the means I am talking about? For problem solving there are many techniques. Some of them are obvious, and we all have somehow taught ourselves to use them. Others are unlikely to be rediscovered easily – it took centuries for some to be developed and recognised. Among the specific techniques I have tried are: Learning when to generalise and when to be specific; working backward from the properties of an assumed solution; breaking up the problem and working toward intermediate results (subgoals); solving a variation of the problem; using syllogism and using analogy; drawing a diagram; ... I can't enumerate them all. But there is no denying that to achieve full conceptual awareness, people have to learn how to learn.

With this admission that you can't enumerate all these things children have to know whose value is not immediately obvious, you have just destroyed your own argument. The implication of saying that there are these things children must learn the value of studying, is that the children may not want to learn them, because they won't know that they are valuable until later. But if you can't enumerate them all, then how do you know, when you are forcing your children to do one of them, that you are not preventing your children from doing another? Also, if you can't enumerate them all, how do you think the children are going to learn the ones you are unable to enumerate? In fact, I believe that not only can you not enumerate them all, but you can't *know* them all, that you can't even know a millionth part of them.

Let us take the example of the rules of grammar. All one has to do is to look in a book of English grammar (which does not even begin to cover the full content of English grammar) to see how much a child has to learn to learn grammar. And we don't explicitly know all these things ourselves; and grammar is only a tiny part of what children are learning. And yet you think that your little list of ten things is an excuse for coercing your children into learning eight of them? I was not taught grammar at school (or anywhere) so presumably you think me handicapped in terms of writing, and yet writing is what I spend much of my time doing. The study of grammar historically has been done by people who first learned

Latin grammar and then just assumed that English grammar was just a debased version of Latin grammar. They produced theories of grammar in which the categories of English grammar were forced into the Latin categories, and hence, for instance, we got the various prescriptive rules, like not ending a sentence with a preposition, and never splitting infinitives and so on. A lot of these rules which children are (or perhaps were?) told about were made up. They were rules made up because there are analogous rules in Latin grammar. Not only is it unnatural, but does not even make sense in the English context, because the categories in which Latin is arranged are just different from those of English. In fact, English is an immensely more powerful language than Latin was, and those rules children were taught were actually mistaken.

Non-native English-speakers often have trouble knowing when to say "*the* BBC,' but "BBC Radio Kent," "the New Scientist," "*the* BBC World Service," but "Scientific American." If such a puzzled foreigner asks me how I know whether to say "the" or not, I can't say. I have no idea why, or what the rule is; but every English ten-year-old child knows whether to say "the" or not. The lesson one has to draw from this is that here are all these children, who spontaneously learn by the age of ten, more than what is in the hefty four-volume book of English grammar I have seen, for instance, they know that one says "the BBC World Service" but "BBC Radio Kent" whereas it is unlikely that this is in the book. But yet parents think that they know what their children should be learning! In fact, they don't know one thousandth of what is in this book of English grammar, let alone what their children should be learning.

to post comments

Comments

This is a good article.

Submitted by John (not verified) on 1 November, 2006 - 23:12

This is a good article. I'm still in high school and don't think that teaching us to "define the tone" and write an essay about how the tone affects you(In English 5,6. Also why would you write a useless essay about how the book makes you feel? You should be reading things like The Crucible for enjoyment, which I did before they tried to make me over-analyze it until it was no longer enjoyable.) will have _ANY_ real use in life. Why would you want to define a tone when you're just trying to enjoy a book or learn something?!

to post comments

Good, but...

Submitted by Miguel (not verified) on 30 January, 2009 - 02:54

The article is fairly good, it does a decent job at explaining a point of view, however, there is one thing that's bothering me... and I quote

> *"I'd say that they (and you!) need to learn that there is no such thing as induction (but perhaps that is a topic for a philosophy list?)."*

There IS such a thing as induction, it's a known form of reasoning (as flawed as it may be) and, from my point of view, the core idea behind scientific thought.

Other than that, a good article, it is.

to post comments

Miguel, You claim to have

Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 7 March, 2009 - 05:52

Miguel,

You claim to have your own point of view of about induction. Could you point out one way it is your own, and not just what some famous people said?

After that, please tell us one flaw in Popper's arguments about induction.

Thank you very much. Elliot Temple **www.curi.us (http://www.curi.us)**

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