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Unschooling Isn't Unparticipating

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*~ Stuart Brown
(The Neuroscience of Play)*

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~Wendy Priesnitz

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From the Editor's Desk

One of the criticisms of life learning that riles me the most is that kids who don't go to school are sheltered from the life of their communities, and don't associate with others of different backgrounds or cultures. Public school systems, these critics say, form the foundation of a caring, tolerant, and democratic society.

That generalization is wrong, of course. And it is based on a misunderstanding, even ignorance, of both schooling and unschooling! As I wrote in my 2000 book *Challenging Assumptions in Education*,

“Scratch the surface of most public school systems and you will find something quite different from justice and democracy, in spite of good intentions. You will find an archaic institution that ... perpetuates social hierarchies, disempowers people and forces them to do things against their will – supposedly for their own good – and encourages a destructive level of consumerism and consumption. If a democratic society is one in which people are collectively in control of their lives and the lives of their communities, then our present-day school systems are anti-democratic.”

In this issue, there are two articles that elaborate on the criticism about non-participation and others put forth by otherwise progressive thinkers. We thought that they would be helpful for those readers whose kids are returning to school right now and who may be getting more criticism than normal.

We're also working on a feature about life learning families and their direct participation in the democratic life of their communities. Have you and/or your kids have been involved in civil society – activism or volunteering in the form of such activities as helping at a food bank, raising money for a cause, public education about an important issue, participating in government meetings or at public protests, to name just a few possibilities? If you or they are willing to write about it, or answer some questions via email, or share a photo or two, I'd love to hear from you within the next month for inclusion in the article.

Life learning kids are not sheltered. They live and learn in the real world, not the “pseudo world” that can be school. We think it would be good to share our experiences with each other and the broader world.

I hope you enjoy this issue, which is our biggest one yet!

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September/October 2014

Editor: Wendy Priesnitz

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Contributors

For This Issue:

Idzie Desmarais, Charles Eisenstein, Peter Gray, Jennifer Head, Martina Tyrrell

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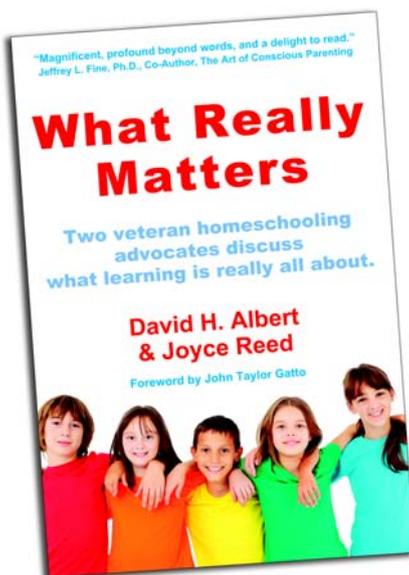
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What Really Matters

by David H. Albert & Joyce Reed



"Reading What Really Matters is like sitting under the kitchen table and eavesdropping on a conversation about the true essence of learning and education. If you want to get a deep feeling for the essence of schooling and homeschooling, read this book!"

Jerry Mintz, Director, Alternative Education Resource Organization

"Magnificent, profound beyond words, and a delight to read... This book is David's apex (so far)."

Jeffrey L. Fine, Ph.D., Co-Author, The Art of Conscious Parenting

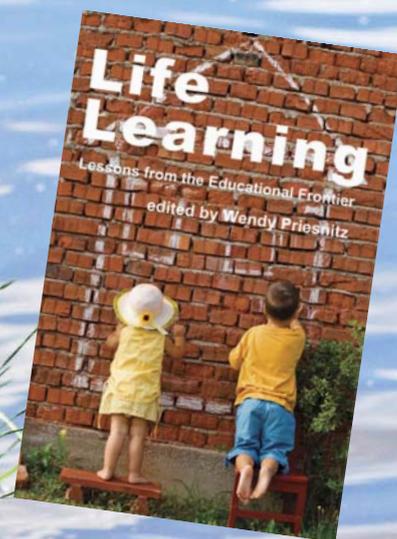
"If I could recommend only one book for familiarizing oneself with the joys and unique possibilities within homeschooling, this would have to be the one."

Lillian Jones, creator of BestHomeschooling.org, mother of a happy and successful homeschool grad, and longtime volunteer for HSC, the HomeSchool Association of California

Two veteran home education advocates discuss what learning is really all about.

“Living in an environment replete with voluntary activity, self-determined goals, immediate feedback to relevant tasks and concentrated attention, a self-directed child garners critical advantages in work and life.”

from “The Flow of Self-Directed Learning”
by Amy Spang
in the book *Life Learning:
Lessons from the Educational Frontier*
(The Alternate Press/Life Media, 2008)



Learning from Dolphins: Unschooling at Sea

By Martina Tyrrell



Photo © Martina Tyrrell

“Quick! Quick! Dolphins,” Lily, our five-year-old, calls excitedly from the cockpit. We are anchored in Ria de Arousa, north-west Spain. Two months ago, during our three-day crossing of the Bay of Biscay, common dolphins joined us day and night, matching their speed and aerial acrobatics to the speed of Carina, our thirty-six-foot sailing yacht. From inside the boat, we could hear their squeaking chatter as they swam close by.

Here in the Ria, we watch pods of dolphins working together each evening to confuse and corral shoals of fish. The dolphins thrash their tails, leap from and slap the water, swim apart and back together again, gradually working their way towards shallow water, trapping their prey. My husband and I, and Katie, our three-year-old, join Lily in the cockpit for another evening of dolphin-watching.

Dolphins have inspired us to learn. They have led us down paths of discussion and exploration, directed by the children’s curiosity. What is a mammal? Do dolphins have ears? Who/What else uses sonar? How do dolphins communicate? How do marine mammals breathe? How do fish breathe? We have wondered if dolphins are interested in us when they come close to our boat, and we have imagined other real and fantastic creatures that live in the sea.

We have turned to our on-board reference books and the Internet to find answers to questions about the characteristics of different dolphin species, to learn about dolphin behavior, and to find out more about aquatic noise pollution and its impact on marine mammals. Dolphins have inspired both children to draw, Lily to transcribe information from a reference book to her notebook, and me to write. They have even given Lily the

confidence to put her head underwater this week at the beach, where she has been attempting to “swim like a dolphin.”

Setting Sail

When my husband and I decided to sell our house, quit our jobs, and move onto a boat, we did not pause to consider the education of our daughters. We had long ago decided to follow a path of home education and the location of that education was, in a sense, irrelevant. We sold our house and bought our boat with surprising rapidity and for two years we spent the warmest six months of each year at sea and the coldest on land, as I worked term-time at a coastal English university. We're full-time live-aboards now and, as I write, we are cruising the scenic Rias of Galicia, slowly making our way south to the Mediterranean.

Before children were a reality, I imagined a semi-structured form of home education, but we have consciously drifted into a philosophy and practice of unschooling. The one undergoing the process of unschooling, however, is me. Despite my philosophical and ideological leanings, thirty-seven years in formal education – as a student, teacher and university lecturer – have left their institutional mark on me. I have to constantly reassure myself that, simply by being alive and alert to the world, and by having the time to explore and play, every day my family learns in ways that are meaningful and worthwhile.

Live Aboard Unschooling

Lily first sailed at nine weeks old and, by the time she was three and Katie was one-and-a-half, we had moved aboard Carina of Devon. We've

cruised in southwest England, southwest Ireland, northwest France and, in summer 2014, we crossed the Bay of Biscay to northwest Spain. We travel slowly but regularly, rarely staying in one place for more than a week.

My husband and I have chosen to work only occasionally, so we live simply and frugally on a limited budget. We spend much of our time anchored in sheltered bays, going ashore each day in our dinghy to play on beaches, visit towns and villages, explore the countryside, and shop and forage for food. All four of us spend different amounts of time absorbed in reading, writing, drawing, and other activities, as well as boat maintenance and repair.

Carina is our home, the place that always stays the same amidst the continually changing world around us. Our travels are guided by weather and sea conditions, and by our interests. My husband spends a lot of time pouring over sailing almanacs, guidebooks, and weather forecasts and reflecting on conversations with and advice

given by locals and other sailors. Together we make decisions about moving to the most sheltered anchorages, about whether we would prefer a day on the beach or a day exploring cultural sites and museums, or whether we need a day at home to catch up on chores.

A day on the beach might include swimming, foraging, building castles or towers from sand or whatever other materials come to hand, reading, and writing. The children and their dad forage for clams, cockles, and mussels at low tide, and for sea greens such as sea beet, rock samphire, or wild fennel. Both children now recognize a wide variety of wild foods and have great patience for and

“I have to constantly reassure myself that, simply by being alive and alert to the world, and by having the time to explore and play, every day my family learns in ways that are meaningful and worthwhile.”



Photo © Martina Tyrrell

Fishing off the boat with dad on a wet day in Ireland, 2012.

expertise in foraging. In addition, they are very proud when their foraged foods contribute to our meals.

Being in Spain this summer, we have visited many very old and elaborate Catholic churches and these have led to recurring conversations about religion, death, the Romans, Spanish conquest of the New World, convents, architecture, art, and more besides. We take advantage of every free museum, art gallery, or exhibition we come across and this summer have learned more than we ever thought possible about the history of canning fish!

Our practical activities around towns – food shopping, going to the post office, buying spare parts for the boat – provide us with a wealth of cultural and linguistic experiences, as we see and sample different foods, observe how people go about their daily lives, and attempt to communicate in the local language. Simply walking down the streets of any town raises a plethora of questions from Lily and Katie that lead to conversations and new learning for all of us: Why do houses have shutters on the windows? How old is this plaza? What does that word mean? Why is that statue there? ▷

Back home, we have managed to squeeze a large number of books aboard our small boat. Our reference books are invaluable in helping us all learn more about the world around us. It should come as no surprise that books about the sea predominate. It is the environment we live in, after all, and much of our learning is guided by what we observe or experience every day. I am a Luddite loathe to embrace electronic books, but I suspect a time will come when our demands for English-language books will outstrip our supply. Like most other live-aboard cruisers we know, we have only intermittent Internet access, and we have a small selection of DVD movies that we enjoy watching from time to time on our laptop. A wish list of books and DVDs is being prepared for my mum, who will visit in a few weeks!

Craft, drawing, and painting materials, LEGO, a dressing-up bag, fuzzy felt, play dough, musical instruments, and a few too many dolls and teddies fill the boat, and the girls play imaginatively together when we are sailing and at anchor.

We use what resources we have in order to learn. The children make little distinction between their “age appropriate” story books and “grown-up” reference books, cook books, field guides, and so on, pouring over both in equal measure. Now that Lily is an independent reader, she

attempts to read everything – in English or Spanish – hungry to understand every word she sees. At random times, when we are in the mood, we practice math or reading or writing. We have discovered the girls prefer writing with a purpose, so letters and postcards written to grandparents and other family members, and shopping lists are currently their main writing activities. Much of Katie’s reading and writing thus far seems to have been

learned from Lily, who takes it upon herself to actively teach her sister.

We are learning Spanish together, all using the same *Spanish for Beginners* book, helping each other with grammar and vocabulary, and taking every opportunity to practice our nascent language skills. I hear Lily and Katie talking, with varying degrees of success, to Spanish children in playgrounds and on

beaches, and we all try to communicate in Spanish with the people we meet each day.

Day-to-day living in a confined space with limited fresh water and energy takes more time than living in a house. Laundry is hand-washed in buckets, and hung to dry along the rails that run around the boat. With some ingenuity, we cook and bake all our favorite foods using our small oven and two-burner hob, in our minuscule kitchen. My husband takes responsibility for maintenance and repair of the engine, sails, dinghy, and so much more. All of these daily tasks take place in close



Playing with LEGO at home on the boat, Spain, 2014

proximity to one another, and we all participate to some extent, assisting and helping when required. The children help with laundry, cooking, and baking, and they love to scrub the decks! When we sail, they take the helm when the sea is calm, and they are learning to row the dinghy. As they grow older, I hope they will take an interest in engine mechanics and rigging.

Despite our tight budget, every day we experience new places and have new adventures, exploring the world as a family. Everything we do provides opportunities for learning, and much of our learning is organic and unplanned. It is evident that our children are learning all the time – from their reading, writing, and mathematical abilities, from the confidence they show in engaging with others, and from their growing independence and practical abilities. But from time to time I still find myself questioning whether unschooling is enough.

Unschooling the Adults

When I was twenty-one years old, studying for a Masters Degree in Anthropology, I studied the writings of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. Freire's philosophy of politicized education and his empowerment of poor, landless Brazilians through meaningful education, combined with Illich's powerful ideas about the institutionalizing role of formal education, moved me to reassess my own relationship with education. The research I conducted for my M.A. led me to question the way school curricula arbitrarily divide and separate subjects. I was exploring the way school children learn about global poverty and inequality, and I was struck by the fact that this topic was confined to Geography and Religious Studies. Why didn't History, English Literature, Math, Economics, or Science also explore the issue of inequality? And, over time, I realized that the same was true for every topic. The boundaries around school subjects were arbitrary, and in my own life I knew my appreciation of literature was linked to my understanding of geography,

history, or science; my knowledge of certain cultures was as much informed by poetry and great literature as it was by my anthropology text books; my appreciation for economics was linked to my shopping choices.

The philosophy and politics of Freire and Illich, combined with my desire to provide my own offspring with a more holistic education, led me to the decision to home educate my own children when they came along. It was another fifteen years before Lily was born, but my conviction remained strong.

But despite that conviction and the evidence

"My greatest teachers in this endeavor are undoubtedly my daughters, whose enthusiasm and curiosity about the world around them is the greatest reassurance of all that we have chosen the right course to sail."

that my children are thriving in our unschooling environment, I find myself struggling to let go of my thirty-seven years in formal education. My own academic abilities have always been judged through meeting pre-set formal criteria, and I have judged my own students' abilities in the same way. I have taught students from elementary school to post-graduate level, in Canada, Japan, Ireland, and the UK. No matter the level or the country, formal curricula are followed and attainment is measured through the meeting of specific and rigid examination criteria. Despite my misgivings about the arbitrariness of subject boundaries, the institutionalizing effects of formal education, and the limitations of testing, I have contributed to and been influenced by each one of these. ▷

So, when I think about the way my husband and I have chosen to educate our daughters, I worry about how they will be judged by others. Are they learning the things they “need” to learn? Are they developing the skills they will need for adulthood? Should we live more structured lives? Should we follow a curriculum? Am I doing them a disservice by practicing unschooling?

Learning All the Time

To reassure myself that we are doing alright, I occasionally carry out a mental audit of our learning. I reflect on the past twenty-four hours, or on how we have developed particular skills over a given period of time. And here’s what I discover: All four of us are learning all the time, supporting and encouraging each other in our learning. We are all improving our abilities to sail and speak Spanish; we are all following our own interests – writing, drawing, sewing, singing; we are all learning about the culture and history of Spain; and about marine biology, oceanography, meteorology, astronomy, and the many other sciences that influence our lives each day.

Coming from different academic and cultural backgrounds, my husband and I have different skills and expertise to share with the children and each other. Listening to and participating in our everyday conversations, our children learn not only about the great variety of topics that interest us; they also learn skills of debate, argument, and lively conversation.

Despite being together most of the time, sailing necessitates independence and the development of practical skills. When we undertake long voyages of twenty-four hours or more, one adult is always on the helm and while the other one sleeps. The children, therefore, must be self-sufficient, taking responsibility for eating, sleeping, and keeping busy. The mere act of living aboard a

boat leads to the development of certain kinetic and sensory skills.

Wherever the Wind Blows

The most reassuring aspect of unschooling is observing how the children approach the world with interest and curiosity. Every encounter and experience fills them with questions. They have no arbitrary boundaries to their curiosity, no neat boxes into which different knowledges must be compartmentalized. This eclectic approach to learning works for them now and will do so later in life.

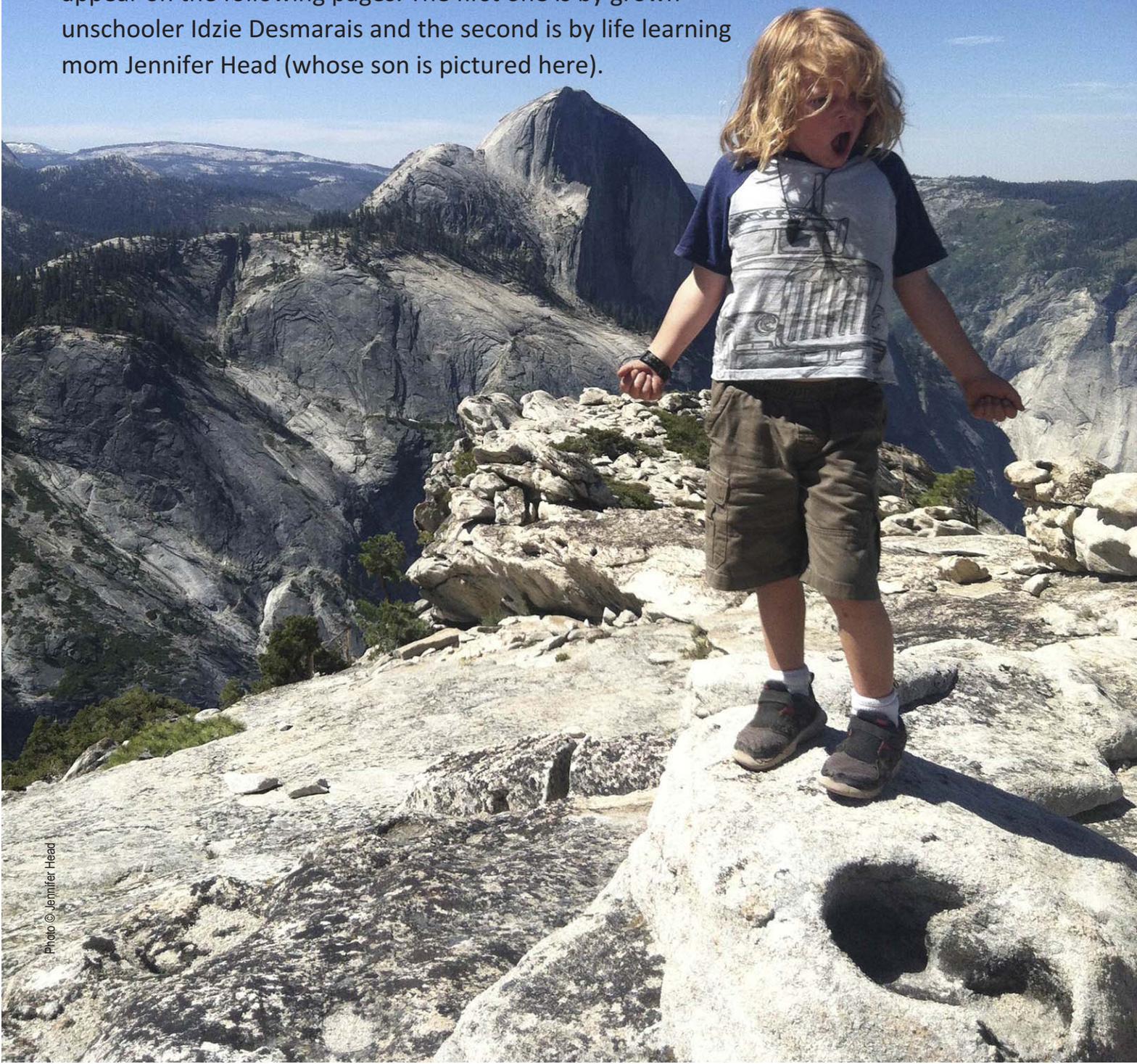
We long to sail the world, but our short-term goal is to winter in the Mediterranean. With each day and each mile I move farther away from formal education, as I open myself up to the possibilities of unschooling. My greatest teachers in this endeavor are undoubtedly my daughters, whose enthusiasm and curiosity about the world around them is the greatest reassurance of all that we have chosen the right course to sail.

Martina Tyrrell is an environmental anthropologist, writer, and unschooler. She lives aboard a sailing boat with her husband and two daughters, and blogs about whatever pops into her head at <http://carinaofdevon.wordpress.com>. - LL -



Responding to those who criticize something they know nothing about . . .

We have all experienced those obligatory not-back-to-school articles in the media just before school starts. No matter how good or bad, they are inevitably accompanied online by negative comments from people who know nothing about unschooling, are afraid of change, are unable to have their thinking challenged, or have a vested financial or emotional interest in the educational status quo. One recent article and the accompanying comments elicited some strong responses from life learners. Some of them appeared on the newspaper's website; two of our regular contributors sent us their responses, which appear on the following pages. The first one is by grown unschooler Idzie Desmarais and the second is by life learning mom Jennifer Head (whose son is pictured here).



When You Unschool, You Don't "Unparticipate"

Community Engagement and the Value of Different Ideas

By Idzie Desmarais

One morning not too long ago, I woke up to find an interview request from the *Montreal Gazette* (the largest English language newspaper in Quebec) sitting in my inbox. After spending a short amount of time pondering my response, I ended up talking to the reporter for over half an hour on the phone. It was a good experience. She was respectful in her questions and actually listened to my responses, which is all I hope for when someone says, "Hey, can I interview you?"

A week later, the unschooling story was a front page feature. The main article was...well, not super positive, to say the least, though that's more to do with the attitude of the Quebec Ministry of Education (that unschooling is illegal) and the views of one of the "experts" spoken to (an education professor whose study I wrote a rebuttal to when it was released a few years ago). I was not quoted in it. What I was quoted in was the accompanying sidebar article, which was very positive, and quoted Peter Gray as well.

The reaction, sadly, has largely been to the main article, and has mainly been the usual after a mainstream media piece on unschooling comes out: defensive, shocked, angry.

One such reaction was a letter to the editor published in the *Gazette*, and it was such a perfect example of someone not understanding un-

schooling and how it works, that I wanted to write a response, clearing up a few things.

Will children really gain the exposure they need outside of school?

"The premise of the 'learn what excites you' is one that we all hold in high regard," writes Ms. Sanders, the author of the aforementioned letter. "That being said, we don't know when we are young what we don't know, and education is that door opener."

No, children don't "know what they don't know." But where the mistake is made is the idea that a) schools are the only place to gain exposure to different topics, b) that schools provide exposure to the most important things, or the things every single child should know, and c) that schools do a good job of imparting knowledge on the subjects they do expose students to.

I'd counter that all three of those assumptions are wrong. Inside of schools, only a few subjects are taught. Outside of schools, learners have the whole world to choose from when it comes to their learning. It's also important to note that unschooled children are far from alone in this process. Parents, acting as facilitators, seek to provide exposure to a variety of things, and children find interests – find learning – through friends,



Photo © JPS/Shutterstock

“Because they don’t teach the truth about the world, schools have to rely on beating students over the head with propaganda about democracy. If schools were, in reality, democratic, there would be no need to bombard students with platitudes about democracy. They would simply act and behave democratically, and we know this does not happen. The more there is a need to talk about the ideals of democracy, the less democratic the system usually is.” ~Noam Chomsky

neighbors, family, the Internet, the library, homeschool coops or groups, local classes, museums, travel.... The world is a big place, and it’s full of a whole bunch of options.

And I really don’t think schools are picking the best options. Schools fail children by focusing on academic, intellectual, and abstract topics to the exclusion of almost all else. As William Upsi Wimsatt said:

“[There were] No sex classes. No friendship classes. No classes on how to build an organization, raise money, navigate a bureaucracy, create a database, buy a house, love a child, spot a scam, ask the right questions, talk someone out of suicide, or figure out what’s important. Those are the things that enhance or mess up people’s lives, not whether they know economic theory or can analyze literature.”

Schools also fail children by upholding the tenets of society as it is. Jeffrey Nall had this to say on the matter:

“In addition to a lack of awareness of the social construction of gender, many teachers, idealists, and visionaries aside, are encouraged to embrace the role of dominant culture’s deputy, tasked with fitting children to the world that is rather than promoting critical analysis and re-imagining society. What is important to realize here is that learning, acquiring new understanding, be it reasonable or not, occurs throughout everyday life. Classroom and schoolyard ‘educational’ experiences such as those described above are formative, and warp children’s sense of self-knowledge.”

Noam Chomsky goes further:



“Because they don’t teach the truth about the world, schools have to rely on beating students over the head with propaganda about democracy. If schools were, in reality, democratic, there would be no need to bombard students with platitudes about democracy. They would simply act and behave democratically, and we know this does not happen. The more there is a need to talk about the ideals of democracy, the less democratic the system usually is.”

Vandana Shiva points out the role schooling plays in industrialization:

“I think the way western education has grown over the last few centuries, especially with the rise of industrialization, was basically not to create human beings fully equipped to deal with life and all its problems, independent citizens able to exercise their decisions and live their responsibilities in community, but elements to feed into an industrial production system.”

Schools do not seek to help students question the way things are and build better alternatives, they simply do their best to present the way things are as the only and even best way. Don’t question, just listen. Some teachers do their very best to foster critical thinking and teach students about important things not found in the curriculum, but the system itself is not built to support that.

It also isn’t built to let students think critically about the institution of schooling itself. Ivan Illich once stated that “School prepares people for the alienating institutionalization of life, by teaching the necessity of being taught.” In a similar vein, in an article by Jordan Bates he comments that:

“In the U.S. and other countries, students are never given the tools to scrutinize the educational standards and practices to which they are subjected. It is rarely, if ever, articulated to students that our way of ‘educating’ and assessing is but one imperfect model; or that much of what we ‘know’ consists of our most current theories and



Photo © PathDoc/Shutterstock

“Schools do not seek to help students question the way things are and build better alternatives...Some teachers do their very best to foster critical thinking and teach students about important things not found in the curriculum, but the system itself is not built to support that. It also isn’t built to let students think critically about the institution of schooling itself.”

preferred interpretations; or that everything they're being taught is filtered through a cultural lens fraught with biases and agendas; or that in all likelihood what we do know about existence is one water molecule in a sprawling super-ocean of things that we do not know."

We also make a big mistake in thinking that, regardless of cultural context, communities, interests, and needs, every single individual child the world over should be learning the exact same things. Learning should be personalized, informed by, as I said in the article in the *Gazette*, "[the learner's] needs, their families and communities and what they're passionate about. The most amazing thing about unschooling is the incredible array of people and that's what builds healthy communities – not trying to have everyone know the exact same things."

Are schools really the most supportive places for children and teens?

To continue with the letter to the editor that sparked this post:

"Today's educators spend endless hours at workshops and professional development meetings to address this goal. Teachers have participated in learning communities that broaden the dimensions of each of the elementary and high school curricula, allowing for new programs of study and various educational paths that support each student."

Yet despite all this, schools remain stagnant, the content taught often feels irrelevant to students, and nothing major ever changes. There are just tweaks here and there that don't really challenge any of the major problems built into the system (strict hierarchies and separation between teachers and students, lack of free choice and intellectual independence, authoritarian instead of cooperative approaches to problems). I think this just goes to show that teachers don't really have that much impact on the system as a whole. Even

the most progressive and caring of teachers are severely limited in what they can do, and important choices about how schools look and function, as well as what becomes a part of curriculum and what doesn't, are made by bureaucrats and politicians, not teachers. She continued:

"Good schooling is not only centered on the academic piece, but encompasses the social and mental health of each student."

That statement is so inaccurate it's insulting. What about the countless teenagers dealing with depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses



Photo © Mandy Coobert/ Shutterstock

"What about the kids who are bullied, burned by cigarettes, beaten, and terrorized by classmates, while school administration does little to nothing about it?"

who are receiving no special support in school? What about all the closeted LGBTQIA+ young people who are just desperately trying to make it through high school safely, feeling completely unable to come out because of the culture at their school? What about the kids who are bullied, burned by cigarettes, beaten, and terrorized by classmates, while school administration does little to nothing about it? What about students of a racial or ethnic minority, who don't see themselves

“Is school really the only place you can participate in community?”



and their communities reflected at all in the curriculum, and who may feel greatly discouraged from practicing their own culture by being forced to conform to the dominant (Western, white) culture which is presented as the only or best option in schools?

When all those things are issues of the past, and the majority of students feel supported, both physically and emotionally safe, and like they have an important say in their own education, then you can say that schools support students' mental health. Until then, I don't really think you can.

Is school really the only place you can participate in community?

“Many students develop their love of sports through the various teams at school,” Ms. Sanders continues. “Others learn confidence and success through plays and musical performance. These electives are clearly designed to enrich and encourage further exploration past the high school years.”

I feel like I've responded a thousand times to this type of question. It's like the words start to blur together as I respond: Unschoolers don't just learn alone all the time we do things with other people yes even structured things.

Unschoolers often participate in a whole range of different activities. In my childhood and teen years, I participated in a play, a musical performance, a choir, a marching band, an Ultimate Frisbee team, a bowling team, as well as numerous classes on as wide-ranging topics as swimming, French language, doll making, and history. In school, the types of things the author lists are “electives.” Out of school, they're an integral part of each individual's learning and life, not to mention something that you have more time for, since you're not restricted by spending most of your waking hours in school, traveling to and from school, or doing homework.

“When you unschool, you also unparticipate in an environment that promotes different ideas, listening skills, and recognition that our personal way is not the only right way to navigate ourselves through life.”

I find it frustrating that people sometimes seem to think that adding the “un” prefix to various words is a good way of mocking or discrediting unschooling. It's not. Moving past that, as I discussed earlier in this article, I think schools do a pretty good job of presenting only the dominant ideas on how the world works and should work. I have yet to see any proof that schools promote

different ideas, listening skills, or the “recognition that our personal way is not the only right way.” In fact, I feel like I’ve seen quite a bit of the opposite. Upon learning that I didn’t go to school, plenty of kids and previously schooled adults have reacted with scorn, and have responded with comments such as “but you **have** to go to school!” and rude attempts at quizzing. That’s not even mentioning the horrible reactions I’ve gotten from schooled people about other parts of my identity, like that I’m queer, and feminist, and have ideas about environmentalism and politics that not many others share. Where is that knowledge of diverse ideas and respect for differences that schools supposedly instill in students?

Furthermore, and contrary to popular belief, unschoolers don’t all hang out only with people who are exactly like them, and thus learn quite well, while spending time in the real world outside of school, that there are many different ideas out there, and a diverse range of experiences and ways of living. I actually wrote about just this subject recently, saying:

“The world is full of people who aren’t like you. In fact, the world contains a wider diversity of people than can often be found in school, considering that schools are: a) age segregated; b) contain students only from that school’s district, which means that as often as not, the student body will be fairly homogeneous in terms of socioeconomic level, race, and even religion.”

That’s true of where you live, as well, so it might not be different outside of school, besides the age-segregation part, but it certainly won’t be worse. While there might be some negative stereotypes of the extremely conservative far-right Christian school-at-homers who wish to keep their children away from everyone who doesn’t think exactly like them, that’s not the reality for any unschoolers I’ve ever met (when it comes to homeschoolers, sometimes that view is accurate, although more frequently it’s not).

Unschoolers are out in the world doing things and meeting people, which means you’re going to

come across quite a few people who don’t share your beliefs, work ethic, and habits. That’s just a part of living life, and a good part, usually!

In conclusion

Going back to the letter, the author concludes:

“As the school year approaches, watch your child grow and thrive. Encourage them to try the course that is unfamiliar to them. As parents, we want our children to learn to live within our community and world with knowledge of others not like ourselves. It makes them strong at work, within their families and multi-dimensional people.”

I hope all children will thrive wherever they find themselves, but the reality is that many will not thrive in schools. If children are instead wilting in school, withdrawing or lashing out in anger, if they seem anxious and depressed, I hope parents will consider looking into other options. Options, like unschooling, that allow young learners to explore and discover new things, at their own pace and in their own way, and to spend plenty of time in various communities, befriending people from a variety of backgrounds, a whole range of ages, and countless different interests.

That’s what will help children be confident people, comfortable in their own skins, and prepared not just for the world as it is, but equipped with the flexibility and creativity to help create the world that might be.

Idzie Desmarais is an unschooler, cook, writer, and anarcho-feminist. She likes to spend her time making tasty food, reading fantasy novels, blogging about unschooling, and going on road trips with friends. Idzie dreams of someday living in the woods with friends and family, growing tons of tasty food, and writing a book (or two or three). Currently, she lives in Montreal, Quebec with her parents, sister, two cuddly kitties, and a big shaggy dog.

- LL -



Natural Learning: Seeing the Forest Despite the Trees

By Jennifer Head

"What does education often do? It makes a straight-cut ditch of a free, meandering brook."
~Henry David Thoreau

A mature forest ecosystem, one that has long since been annihilated by fire or at the hands of humans, is complex and high in biodiversity, each species with its own specific needs, interacting with one another, finding the niche that works for them. Sometimes it's hard to see the forest for the trees, the big picture, the whole nine. I know; I've been there.

At the height (and end) of my academic career, what was originally an immense love of the natural world gave way to an extreme narrowing of my vision, purpose, and passion as I hyper-focused on a few amino acids of one domain of one subunit of one protein in one critter. It's hard to see the entire forest when your eyeballs are smashed up against one tree.

This is the current predicament in which we find ourselves with the standards-based, test-obsessed, public education system. Although homogenization and federalization of education are relatively recent phenomena, corporate educational entities and the educational experts they attract

have made quick work of bulldozing forward into the proverbial forest, over mycelium, past herbaceous ground cover, beside woody shrubs, under the canopy, and up to one singular tree. They have chosen one narrow niche in which all children must now thrive, completely blind to the myriad possible ways to flourish.

One of the rationalizations I often hear cited as just reason to perpetuate the decidedly narrow view of mass education is that educators have spent countless hours in workshops developing ways to make linear, lock-step, standards-based education more interesting. Expecting all children to thrive in an educational system where the desired outcome is homogeneity because so many hours have been invested in developing the plan, is analogous to saying that a given plant should thrive in the wrong habitat because so many hours were invested in digging the hole. The logic is completely flawed and the end does not come close to justifying the means.



This time of year, there is a familiar resurgence of back-to-school mania, and with it, concomitant criticism of alternative learning lifestyles. Normally, they don't get under my skin. Why would they? I love my decisions enough to not need everyone else to love them. However, a letter published very recently in the *Montreal Gazette* struck a chord in the unschooling community. The author, an educational consultant, asserts that young children need educational experts to tell them what to know; that unschooled students don't have access to athletic, musical, or artistic opportunities; that unschoolers only interact with people just like themselves; that unschoolers are ill-equipped to deal with life's challenges as a result of not having attended school; and that they are lacking in experiences that are unfamiliar to them. To be more specific, according to the author, unschooled children "unparticipate." To this I have to say:

If a desired outcome of "good schooling" is truly the social and mental health of each student, education would be interest-driven, schools would resemble villages (i.e., would be more diverse in every way), and students would have much more freedom. For unschoolers, nothing is "designed" for them. The enticing and carefully-scripted enrichment activities of which the author speaks are all still available to unschoolers. Why on Earth wouldn't they be? One doesn't have to sit at a desk all day to be able to take an art class, play an instrument, or participate in sports. Get out of that box!



"One doesn't have to sit at a desk all day to be able to take an art class, play an instrument, or participate in sports. Get out of that box!"

As far as exposure to diverse people and ideas, how does one arrive at the silly notion that unschoolers only hang out with people exactly like themselves? On our travels and during the workshops that we attend, we interact and work with folks from toddlers to octogenarians, with people from all walks of life, with people from every corner of the planet. Still think we're sheltered? My six-year-old has played games unique to the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast, spoken French with a Belgian, had a tickle fight with a Kiwi, cracked codes with a Canadian, made armor out of Doug fir bark with an Israeli, befriended a man from Iran, played with a boy from Slovakia, tasted honey from a Transylvanian. Still think we're sheltered? He has slept outside more than most North Americans would in six lifetimes. He's looked down on Half Dome. He's handed out ice cold drinks to long-distance hikers in the desert. He learned to catch lizards with a noose made of grass. He has explored an ice cave and stood on a mountain made of volcanic glass. He knows how to build a rocket mass heater and a house out of earth. Still think we're sheltered? He plays basketball and soccer with a local school district but has no interest in piano or flute. However, he can play the didgeridoo. Does that count? He doesn't know all of his multiplication tables but he knows the ones that have been relevant to his life thus far. However, he can gather wood sorrel for breakfast and plantain to heal a wound, talk to owls, chop his own wood and start a fire, find Betelgeuse in the

winter sky, and he knows that the song of the Swainson's Thrush in spring signifies the coming of summer. Is any of that on the test? He's also interested in algebra, the lifecycles of stars, chemistry, geology, dinosaurs, and evolution. But none of that will be on the test until high school, if ever. It's amazing where the human mind goes when it's not being led.

As the school year approaches and millions of children around the world will once again sit in a room with dozens of children their own age (and likely social class), while they sit still and hear information over which they have no control, while they choose from a heartbreakingly short list of electives that a select few deem worthy, while their eyes oscillate from clock to window and back, I'll be watching my child grow and thrive while participating in LIFE.

Don't take my word for it, skeptics. Come **participate in reality** with natural learners. Experience the world through the eyes of a free-range child. See the light in their eyes that still burns brightly. Seek out unschooled children and see for yourselves that they are confident, articulate, self-motivated, diverse, rarely bored (if at all), adaptable, self-entertaining, collaborative, well-traveled, and naturally inquisitive about world around them. Most of all, re-

member that life learning is not just for children. If you should ever find your view of the world to be a bit myopic, your views on education too top-down or one-size-fits-all, don't forget to take a few (or many) steps back to the edge of the forest, back to

where you were when you were a bright-eyed child eager to explore the world, so you can once again see the big picture.



"If you should ever find your view of the world to be a bit myopic, your views on education too top-down or one-size-fits-all, don't forget to take a few (or many) steps back to the edge of the forest, back to where you were when you were a bright-eyed child. eager to explore the world."

Jenn Head lives on the beautiful Southern Oregon Coast and is a recovering academic who has since embarked on a magnificent life learning adventure with her seven-year-old son. She loves motherhood, natural building, backpacking, felting, quilting, cooking, reading, gardening, traveling, living off the grid, and so much more. She hopes to inspire and empower families to live more sustainably and simply by requiring less and forming deeper connections with the Earth. She is currently learning to build beautiful and sustainable houses from earth alongside her son

and will soon be further exploring her interests in Permaculture design and practice. This is her second article for Life Learning Magazine. She and her son recently created a website called Yada Yada Yada (www.yadayadalife.wordpress.com) where they plan to share their amazing adventures. - LL -

The Deschooling Convivium

Undoing the Habits of the Classroom

Speaker, author (*The Ascent of Humanity* and *Sacred Economics*, among others), blogger, self-described “degrowth activist,” and Yale graduate Charles Eisenstein provides suggestions for how a group of people can deschool themselves.

A Deschooling Convivium is a regular gathering of [people] dedicated to undoing the habits of the classroom.

And what are the habits of the classroom? Here is a partial list:

- Looking to an outside authority (teacher, book) for answers
- Looking to an outside authority for questions
- Having assignments
- Being graded
- Being examined
- Wanting to be right
- Expecting rewards for being right
- Self-censorship
- Sitting in rows
- Being passive
- Wanting to be told what to do
- Automatic opposition to and distrust of authority
- Pretending to care
- Doing things “good enough” and no better
- Staying in the head
- Being objective
- Playing it safe
- Scoring points
- Not being real
- Being academic
- Not showing real feelings
- Not letting yourself be vulnerable
- Competition

- Raising your hand
- Seeking approval
- Learning by being “taught”

The habits of the classroom might be appropriate in certain circumstances – for instance, in a classroom. The problem is that these habits become so ingrained that they become a way of life that infects our relationships, our learning, and our whole approach to life.

For example, have you ever known a professor who tends to “lecture” even when he’s not in a classroom? Have you ever found yourself craving step-by-step instructions on how to accomplish something in life, not sure how to even begin figuring it out for yourself? Have you become uncomfortable or irresponsible in situations where it is unclear exactly what is expected of you? In the classroom we are typically granted very little freedom – has that become a habit too, so that you are unused to freedom or even a little bit afraid of it? Do you find yourself often afraid to speak up, for fear of saying something “wrong”? Are you so used to being told what to do, doing your assignments, that you aren’t sure what you really want to do with your life? Are you such a stranger to your passion in life that you assume you must be lazy? Do you feel that you are not really living your own life, and instead living a life structured by other people’s expectations? ▷

Apathy, sullenness, and resentment, you see, are a normal response to being coerced into doing that which we don't truly want to do. And this history runs so deep and it includes almost all of us. How many fourth graders actually want to learn long division and the state capitals and Vasco de Gama and the presidents? If your favorite subjects were recess and lunch, then you know you weren't doing what you wanted to. The apathy of the schoolchild is a natural response – even a noble response – to the ordeal of the classroom. But then that apathy too becomes a habit, and we float through life maintaining a cynical distance from the world, unwilling to commit fully to anything or anyone. We become indifferent or blindly rebellious.

The Convivium

One of the most toxic hidden lessons of school is that learning is hard. The reason it seems hard is that school makes it hard, which in turns renders us dependent and reliant on teachers, experts, and other authorities. And how is learning made hard? It is made hard by being forced on us. You see, anything is hard if we don't want to do it, because then we are struggling against ourselves. When we are really interested in something, learning comes easy. So you can see that when we become apathetic, everything seems hard and we shy away from challenges, find the easy way, become slackers, and lose our innate sense of self-confidence. Actually, learning is easy.

The challenge in the enterprise of deschooling is to break free of those habits of indifference, playing it safe, cynicism, and non-commitment. Deschooling doesn't happen by sitting around talking about it. Deschooling is about transformation – the shedding of an old way of being in favor of a new. It is not that the old disappears, it is just

“The apathy of the schoolchild is a natural response – even a noble response – to the ordeal of the classroom. But then that apathy too becomes a habit, and we float through life maintaining a cynical distance from the world, unwilling to commit fully to anything or anyone. We become indifferent or rebellious.”

that unconscious behavior patterns become conscious, so that we are no longer slaves to them. And this too is not hard! It is scary though. The main barrier to deschooling is fear. We stay in our comfort zone and are afraid to enter new territory. (And if you think about it, you may find that this cautiousness is also a result of our schooling.)

Without a firm intention going into a Deschooling Convivium, it is possible that no one will leave their comfort zone, and it will be no different from any other gathering. The conversation will devolve into superficial topics that don't touch anything real in anyone. Everyone will be presenting and upholding their usual persona, not being real, playing it safe, not opening, not trusting.

With this in mind, however, we can say that almost any activity is suitable for a Deschooling Convivium. There is no “curriculum” for a Deschooling Convivium! The Deschooling Convivium is an organic entity that grows and adapts over time. The Deschooling Convivium you experienced as a participant may be very different from the one you experience as a leader. In fact, the whole idea of faithfully replicating a

curriculum, of administering a program created by someone else, is contrary to the spirit of the Deschooling Convivium. I encourage you to make it your own. Experience freedom.

The Deschooling Convivium will be different from any other club or informal gathering of friends you've experienced. Whether as participant or leader, you will learn new things about yourself and become comfortable with a way of being that is more effective, more authentic, and more free than what is ordinary. So in contrast to the habits of schooling, the Deschooling Convivium fosters:

- Self-confidence
- Autonomy
- Honesty
- Cooperation
- Leadership
- Listening
- Trust
- Acceptance of others
- Non-judgmentality
- Spontaneity
- Fearlessness
- Independence
- Interdependence
- Mindfulness
- Imagination
- Integrity
- Commitment

Some Ground Rules

Before I describe some of the activities that worked well in our Convivium, I will offer some general principles for creating a space where all of this can happen. None of the activities will be effective without an atmosphere of comfort, acceptance, and trust. These will grow over time of



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“The whole idea of faithfully replicating a curriculum, of administering a program created by someone else, is contrary to the spirit of the Deschooling Convivium.”

course, and will grow even faster in the context of some important ground rules:

1. Anyone is free to opt out of any activity he or she feels uncomfortable with. He/she then takes the role of a silent witness. There is no stigma attached to this choice. We fully trust in each person's wisdom to know when it is time to take the next courageous step. We remind each other that we all have our own unique fears and limitations; what may be trivial for one person could be huge for someone else. We provide a space for people to unfold according to their own inner timing, which we recognize as perfect.

2. We maintain confidentiality without secrecy. Anything someone shares in the Deschooling Convivium remains in that sacred space and we don't share it outside the group. At the same time, nothing we do is secret. We are completely open about everything we do. All of our activities are public knowledge and may be publicly shared.

3. The membership of a Deschooling Convivium stays constant over the entire eight to twelve week

duration. We do not bring in guests or add new members halfway through. At least, that is my suggestion. The reason is that trust builds with familiarity, and the learning and personal breakthroughs tend to be cumulative. Each session builds on all that went before it. It is best if people don't join halfway through.

4. The Deschooling Convivium has leadership without hierarchy. The leader or leaders never attempt to coerce, command, pressure, or control. They do not seek to establish their authority. They do not try to exact promises from participants or enforce promises or "hold people accountable." That would be a school model. We trust in people's higher accountability, to themselves.

5. No money is exchanged for a Deschooling Convivium. There is no tuition and the leaders are not paid. The only exception is to equally share the cost of the venue rental, or other direct expenses such as if you rent a van to go somewhere.

6. No academic credits are involved in a Deschooling Convivium. The motivation for participating comes entirely from within.

7. I feel it is very important for the leader not to exchange sexual or romantic energy with any of the participants. It may or may not be helpful to declare this intention to the group. Even if you do not declare it out loud, set that intention to yourself. It will enhance the atmosphere of trust.

As Deschooling Convivium leader you are not a teacher expected to have all the answers. In a classroom, teachers rarely try anything new and risk failure. Well, this isn't a classroom, and you are free of that limitation. You don't have to stick

to your plan. You can let go of the results and let something even better emerge. If an activity is a total flop you can halt it in the middle, or you can say, "This isn't working, is it?" And ask for input.

The Flow of an Activity

In a two-and-a-half hour convivium, there is usually time for two activities. Each one typically begins with a contexting. You would explain what to do, what to notice, how it will work. Usually you

will not want to state what you hope to achieve, because that might program people with a right/wrong mentality. You might start with a story, a poem, a song. You might say what it is "about" without setting up specific expectations, as in: "This activity is about trust," "This activity is about judgment," "This activity is about creativity." Then say a few things about trust, judgment, or creativity. In the following section explaining

various activities I will also give you some ideas on how to introduce them.

After the activity is finished, usually we take some time to share about it, so we can digest and integrate the experience.

Once the conversation has started, let it develop on its own. However, you will want to keep it somewhat focused – that is, in harmony with the intention of the Deschooling Convivium. This requires both mindfulness and skill. Sometimes it will be easy to recognize when it has veered off course. For example, someone might illustrate a point by recalling a scene from a movie, which is totally fine, but before you know it someone else has chimed in, "Oh, I saw that movie too – do you remember the part where Harry slipped and fell on a banana peel" and before you know it every-

"In a classroom, it typically follows a patten of teacher, student A, teacher, student B, teacher, student C, back to teacher, and so on. The teacher controls the conversation. It is actually a two-party conversation between teacher and class, not a multiparty conversation."

“Immersed in the deadening environment of institutional education, all of us have a deep and powerful longing for community, for authenticity, for intimacy.”

one is talking about their favorite movies. A fun conversation to be sure, but ordinary; you can have that anywhere. When you see something like that happening, intervene and nudge it back on course.

You see, as leader, you are not actually controlling or manipulating the conversation, because everyone else is gathered with the same intention you are. Immersed in the deadening environment of institutional education, all of us have a deep and powerful longing for community, for authenticity, for intimacy. One of our deepest desires is to know others and be truly known ourselves. As Deschooling Convivium leader you are merely keeping the group on track with that intention.

Another key ingredient for a powerful Deschooling Convivium conversation is for whoever is speaking to offer attention and eye contact to the whole group, and not just to the leader. That is a habit of the classroom if I ever saw one: Tell the answer to Teacher!

In a Deschooling Convivium, the conversation bounces around the circle, go to more than one person before coming back to the leader. In a classroom, it typically follows a patten of teacher, student A, teacher, student B, teacher, student C, back to teacher, and so on. The teacher controls the conversation. It is actually a two-party conversation between teacher and class, not a multiparty conversation. In contrast, a Deschooling Convivium leader lets it go on its own, releases



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control, witnesses it happen, and participates as an equal, while at the same time preventing it from straying from the intention of the Deschooling Convivium.

Sample Activities

Guided Mingling

There are two ways to do this: eyes open and eyes closed. I recommend doing both, first with eyes open. It is good to follow with the eyes-closed version immediately after the eyes-open—the contrast is most illuminating. Save the integration conversation for after both segments are completed.

First define the space for the activity (the room, the carpeted area, etc.) Have everyone wander around aimlessly for a minute, then offer some points for awareness:

- Do you find yourself making eye contact? Avoiding eye contact?
- Do you typically break eye contact first?
- Notice your posture
- Notice your breathing
- Where are you putting your hands? Crossed? In pockets?
- What kind of expression do you have on your face?



Offer these points occasionally over the next minute or two, with time in between each point so that people can really experience the awareness it generates. By now people will probably be feeling pretty uncomfortable. If that feeling is strong in the room, you might offer a point for awareness about that too: “Do you feel uncomfortable? Awkward? Locate that feeling in your body.” When the exercise has gone on long enough (you will know when – trust yourself), then announce: “Okay, now everyone close your eyes and continue mingling.” Again, let them wander around for a minute or so, then offer a different set of points for awareness:

- What do you do when you bump someone? How do you feel?
- Are you holding your hands and arms protectively?
- Do you have an expression on your face even though no one can see you?
- Notice whether your shoulders are tense.
- Do you tend to stay on the fringes or head to the center?

Another thing you can ask in this activity, and in many other activities too, is “When I ask these questions, do you feel right or wrong?” Then encourage them to let the answer just be, without evaluating right/wrong.

This is a wonderful game for the first Deschooling Convivium meeting, because it is fun, a good ice-breaker, and generates rich conversation afterward. It can inspire insights into our automatic unconscious ways of presenting ourselves, ways of maintaining distance, the artificiality of crowds (and classrooms?), as well as our nervousness when some of the distancing mechanism are inactivated. I wouldn’t mention all that beforehand though. Just give the instructions and let the activity work its magic.

Offering of Questions

In a classroom, the teacher typically not only defines the answers, but provides the questions as

well, whether on an exam or as embodied in a curriculum – which says, “Here is what we will learn about.” School-learning is very much about producing answers. This activity takes a very different approach.

Give everyone a piece of paper and a pen and ask them to write down their questions. Not “questions you want to ask me,” but general questions about life, the world, college, or any issue that is present in your life. Ask everyone to write down at least ten or fifteen questions. Explain that sometimes a question will lead to deeper questions, and that they have plenty of time to follow the questions wherever they might lead. Do this yourself too. After it seems that everyone is finished, ask people to choose the question “most present for you at this time in your life.” Invite them then to spend five to ten minutes just being with that question, not seeking an answer, but just being with the question, the feeling of longing to know. In that period of silence, remind them once or twice to play with it, explore it, see what trains of thought it takes them to.

For part three of this activity, divide up into partners. Each pair goes to a quiet corner somewhere. One person takes on the role of Asker, the other takes on the role of Listener. The Asker kneels up on his/her knees; the Listener stands and listens silently, without changing expression or nodding the head, while the Asker asks his/her question from before. When you introduce this exercise, suggest that the Asker start with the question and then elaborate, asking maybe in different ways, explaining the background a little, maybe proceeding to an even deeper question behind the starting question—always gazing into the Listener’s face. After a few minutes, when you sense it is time, ask everyone to thank their partner and switch roles. Also remember to instruct the Listeners to do their best to listen with full attention and no judgment, compassionately, with full confidence that the universe will provide the answer at the perfect time in the perfect way. And the Askers



“One of the great myths of our educational system is that learning is hard. Well, it is not. An even broader cultural myth is that life is hard – a struggle, necessitating willpower, discipline, hard work, a great effort at self-control and self-improvement.”

are to see the Listener as an omniscient being. The kneeling position automatically creates that perception.

This is an extraordinarily powerful exercise that will generate a very rich conversation afterwards. People will have amazing insights and profound realizations. Really let everyone have the chance to fully explore and integrate it in the conversation. Provide them a big listening. Lose any agenda and trust the process. You will see a great wisdom and humanity emerge from the participants.

Again, one of the great myths of our educational system is that learning is hard. Well, it is not. An even broader cultural myth is that life is hard – a struggle, necessitating willpower, discipline, hard work, a great effort at self-control and self-improvement. Well guess what? Life is not hard either, and neither need it be hard to lead the Deschooling Convivium. Everything that we want to happen is just waiting to happen, bursting to happen. As leader you do not need to impose anything on people from without. It is already there. As leaders we merely invite it out and welcome it into the world.

Trying hard will not usher in the more beautiful world our hearts tell us is possible. That is just as impossible as trying hard to be creative, or trying

to make someone be something they are not. We don't need to try hard, because the more beautiful world is present already, closer than close. Some of the other activities that I suggest [in the complete guide – see link at the end] will give you a sense of this. The spontaneity exercises, for instance, illustrate a mode of creativity that has little to do with trying and much to do with getting out of the way of what already is. So leaders, don't make it hard. All you need to do is allow your own creativity, authenticity, and spontaneity to be present. You can do this!

There is a beautiful Stage Four to the offering questions activity that provides a great segue to a closing ceremony. Everyone picks up their list of questions and identifies ten that they are willing to share. Then, go around the circle many times, each person speaking a question out loud. Before you begin, remind everyone to give each question a full listening, maybe pausing a few seconds in between. I personally feel that no integration conversation is necessary for this part; it is poetry and speaks for itself.

Improvisational Theater Games

The habit of self-censorship has been so deeply instilled in us that we sometimes cannot access

our inborn spontaneity. Ask someone, “Imagine a box. You open it – what’s inside?” they will often hesitate, skip over the first couple responses, and then “make something up.” Spontaneity means going with the answer that was already there. To do that, the internal censor has to get out of the way. Since in school this could result in ridicule or the wrong answer, we have a fear barrier to being spontaneous.

In order to undo this habit, I have used many of the concepts and games from Keith Johnstone’s marvelous book, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*. I encourage you to read this book and experiment with bringing some of its techniques into your convivium. I put three participants in charge of devising an activity for the next week, and we acted out some hilarious improvisational scenes that they’d come up with. The storytelling games are especially liberating because in addition to developing spontaneity, they show people that it is OK to not always try to control one’s expressions in order to look good.

Read Johnstone’s book and familiarize yourself with the concept of blocking and accepting. Try a few of the games: “Yes, and” “Yes, but” “Overaccepting”, and so on. It helps to demonstrate them first with someone in the group who has improv experience or is naturally gifted at it. Well, we are all naturally gifted at it. What I mean is someone whose natural gift for improv is relatively intact.

Another concept Johnstone discusses is status, which of course is an obvious characteristic of the classroom and the academic world in general. You can read aloud sections on status from Johnstone’s book and try some of his exercises. Master-servant scenarios are fun. You might also talk about some

of the body cues and verbal cues we use to convey status, and ask people to become aware of them in their conversations. Stage some conversations between two people with everyone else watching, and see how many status cues you can recognize.

We played a great status game from *Impro* called the Hat Game. Four people wear hats labeled with numbers: One, Two, Three, and Four, while the others watch. Number One is the boss; he or she can order the others around, manage them, yell at them, or at the most extreme, take their hats off and throw them at their feet. (Do not throw them far away, as it breaks up the scene.) Number Two can do the same to Three and Four, while Three can only do it to Four, the lowest in the hierarchy. Number One’s favorite target is number Two, of course, while Three and Four are usually (but not always)

beneath his notice. These four people are a team trying to accomplish a given task, such as “find Lisa’s wallet.”

Since Three and especially Four are quite powerless, their job is to covertly resist by inventing problems and passing them up the hierarchy, by being lazy, and by pretending to be stupid. They cannot overtly disobey though, because they are afraid of punishment (the humiliation of having their hat thrown on the floor). Number One wants to achieve the objective, but equally important is to constantly establish his or her authority. To do this he/she can’t humiliate Two too much, so that Two loses authority in the eyes of Three and Four, only enough to establish that he is top dog. Here is a typical scene:

One: Okay, listen up guys. We have to find Lisa’s wallet. Two, divide up the room with Three and Four and let’s start searching. ▶

“In a classroom, the teacher typically not only defines the answers, but provides the questions as well, whether on an exam or as embodied in a curriculum. School learning is very much about producing answers, not questions.”

Two: You heard him, guys. Three, you look under all the chairs. Four, you look inside the desks.

Three: Four, don't just stand there, start looking.

Four: Which side of the room should I start on?

Three: It doesn't matter... oh, just start with the big desk.

One: Two, why hasn't anyone started looking yet?

Two: We're on it, sir! Three, why haven't you and Four started looking?

Three: We are, we are. Hurry up, Four! Found anything?

Four: The desk drawer is locked, sir.

Three: (to Two) the desk drawer is locked.

Two: (to One) the desk drawer is locked.

One: Well the wallet obviously couldn't be there then, could it? (angrily) Why is everyone still standing around? (throws Two's hat on the ground).

Two: Three, pick up my hat! Put it on my head. And now get your butts in gear.

Three: Four, how many drawers have you looked in? None? Why not?! (throws Four's hat on the ground) Now pick that up and start looking.

Two: Three, found anything under the chairs yet?

Three: I'm getting to it, it's just that Four...

Two: Let's leave Four out of it. She is in charge of the desks, I'm talking about the chairs. You mean to tell me you haven't even started to look yet? (Throws Three's hat on the floor)

Three: Four, pick up my hat! And help me look under these chairs.

One: Two, all I'm seeing around here is fighting. You're supposed to be managing these people. How hard can it be? It's just a very simple task. (Three and



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“Spontaneity means going with the answer that was already there. To do that, the internal censor has to get out of the way. Since in school this could result in ridicule or the wrong answer, we have a fear barrier to being spontaneous.”
Improvise games can help change that.

Four have stopped searching to watch with secret delight as Two gets in trouble. But now One turns to them.) Three, Four, what do you think is so funny?

Three: Ah, um.

One: (throws both Three's and Four's hat on the ground).

And so forth. To anyone watching, it soon becomes apparent why bureaucracies never get anything done. In the conversation after this hilarious activity, ask the group whether they maybe see a little bit of themselves in each of the four clowns. Replay the game again with a different “task.” Experiment by assigning meek, deferential people to the role of number one, and more dominating people to number four. ▶

"...We are the creators of our lives. That is the opposite of school's message, which is that life is about going through a curriculum laid out by others. School is preparation for living lives that are not our own."



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The simplest way to start is with ten or fifteen minutes of silence. If you have never led a meditation, then good! It will probably be awesome. Don't start thinking it is hard. I would tell you how I lead it, but I do it a different way every time. However, since we have huge taboos against doing nothing and wasting time, especially in a classroom where we are supposed to be productive, I suggest encouraging the group to sit silently not doing anything productive, but just being. You could even introduce it as simply as, "We are now going to spend fifteen minutes just being. Don't try to do anything productive. Just be with yourself." You may be surprised at how rich a conversation this generates.

Creative visualization, popularized by Shakti Gawain in her book by that title, is a way to utilize the creative imaging power of the mind. If you

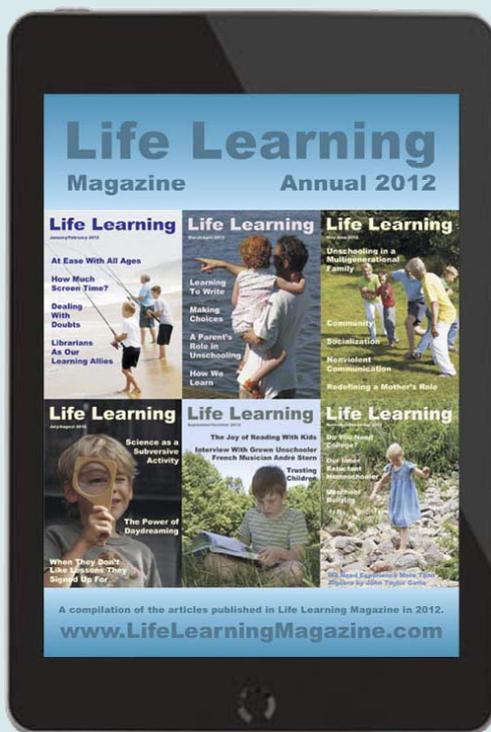
read Gawain's book you'll get lots of ideas. I like to link this activity to the idea that we are the creators of our lives. That again is the opposite of school's message, which is that life is about going through a curriculum laid out by others. School is preparation for living lives that are not our own.

*There are many other suggestions for group activities designed to reverse the school mindset in *The Deschooling Convivium*, the complete version of which is available for download and sharing at www.charleseisenstein.net. Charles Eisenstein is an American speaker, author, blogger, self-described "degrowth activist," and Yale graduate. His books include *The Ascent of Humanity*, *Sacred Economics*, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*, and *the Yoga of Eating*. - LL -*

Did You Miss Something?

Life Learning Annuals for 2012 and 2013.

These PDF e-books contain all the articles that were published in Life Learning Magazine on a yearly basis. (And we're working backwards to 2002!) The articles appear exactly as they do in the magazines, complete with photos, layouts, and live links to resources and ads. Plus, we've created a table of contents for each year, making it easy to find the articles you're looking for.



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Following Their Passions

What Unschoolers Do When They Grow Up

By Peter Gray

In the last issue of *Life Learning Magazine*, we published an overview of recent research conducted by Dr. Peter Gray (a research professor at Boston College and author of the book *Free to Learn*) and his colleague Gina Riley about grown unschoolers. This article elaborates on the careers that these young adults (median age twenty-four) have pursued.

The great majority of the grown unschoolers surveyed were gainfully employed and were supporting themselves, despite the difficult economic time in which the survey was conducted.

They chose careers that are extensions of their childhood interests.

By our coding, fifty-eight (seventy-seven percent) of the participants described a clear relationship between their childhood interests and activities and their current vocation or career. This percentage was highest for the twenty-four participants in the always-unschooled group (eighty-eight percent), but was high in the other two groups as well. [See the table in the previous article for details.] The sample included professional artists and musicians who had played at art or music as children; computer technicians and programmers who had developed their skills in childhood play; and outdoor enthusiasts who had

found ways to make a living that embraced their love of Nature.

Here are four examples that are among my favorites – favorites because they are the kinds of careers that school curricula ignore, careers that can strike the fancy of brave young people not in school, who have time and freedom to follow their dreams.

Becoming a circus performer, starting a circus, and then becoming a tall-ship bosun:

One of our respondents, a twenty-six-year-old woman who had always been unschooled, wrote:

“At the age of three, I decide to become a circus performer, and at the age of five I enrolled in an after-school circus program. I trained and performed as a circus performer continuously until the age of seventeen and on-and-off ever since. From the ages of nineteen to twenty-four, my best friend and I ran our own contemporary circus company. As a result of that, I overcame a strong fear of heights to work as a trapeze artist and learned a considerable amount about rigging so that I would be able to ensure my own safety in the air.

“As my circus career has waned, I’ve tried a number of new things and the one that caught my full attention has been tall ship sailing. Working on the ocean is a very captivating experience and it employs the skills that I learned in the circus nearly every single day – skills like balance, hand-eye coordination, and even getting along with people in cramped living arrangements.

“The great majority of the grown unschoolers surveyed were gainfully employed and were supporting themselves, despite the difficult economic time in which the survey was conducted. ...they are the kinds of careers that school curricula ignore, careers that can strike the fancy of brave young people not in school, who have time and freedom to follow their dreams.”

“I am currently employed as a tall-ship rigger/bosun...The job of bosun can change from ship to ship, but aboard training vessels my work involves maintenance as well as training and sailing. I am in charge of inspecting, maintaining, and fixing the rigging, the sails, the deck, and the hull. Additionally I am expected to be involved in sailing the vessel, leading a watch during extended periods at sea, educating the public about the history of the vessels, and educating the trainees about sail handling and vessel maintenance.

“I would like to sail and drive large sailing vessels around the world. I am currently studying for a 100T master’s license from the US Coast Guard that would allow me to be the captain of a vessel of 100 gross tonnes or less. USCG license are graduated by size of vessel and area of operation so this is the first step towards a license for a larger vessel.”

Wilderness aerial photographer:

This twenty-one-year-old young man, who left school after first grade, started a business of taking beautiful (I can say that, because I saw some of them) artistic photos of wilderness scenes from the air. He wrote:

“Growing up with so much freedom was awesome! I did lots of outdoor activities including skiing in the winter and hiking/camping in the summer. If I hadn’t done it this way, I’m not sure I would have been able to combine the three things I really enjoy – outdoors, flying, and photography – into a business.” He wrote further that he started his own photography business when he was fifteen years old and also, that same year, started

paragliding. The paragliding led to an interest in flying fixed-wing aircraft, and then he combined all three of his passions into a single business.

Assistant (beginning at age 18) to a famous movie director, producer, and screenwriter:

This young man, who was twenty years old when he responded to the survey, was unschooled except for kindergarten and ninth grade. (He went to school that one year to “try it out”— he made honor roll and then left.) His passion for film started early. By age eleven, he was making YouTube videos with friends. He began taking community college courses in mass communication at age sixteen, and, at age eighteen, was in the process of applying to film school when a great opportunity arose – to be a local production assistant on a major film that was being produced where he lived. His bosses liked him so much that they told him, “If you can get yourself to LA, we’ll keep you on the show.” One thing led to another, he became close to the famous director, and at the time of the survey had a higher-level job, in LA, on the production side of another major film. In response to our question about whether he earned enough to be financially independent, he wrote, “Very much so.” His ultimate goal is to direct movies himself, and he is working diligently toward that goal.

“Self-employed polymath”:

A number of respondents showed a readiness, even eagerness, to change careers as their inter-



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“His passion for film started early. By age eleven, he was making YouTube videos with friends. He began taking community college courses in mass communication at age sixteen, and, at age eighteen, was in the process of applying to film school when a great opportunity arose – to be a local production assistant on a major film.”

ests changed—just as they had changed activities as their interests changed when they were children. The extreme of this was one of the older respondents to our survey, thirty-nine at the time. He had experienced a mix of schooling and unschooling through tenth grade and then left high school for good. He went on to a bachelor’s degree in mechanical engineering and a life that he refers to as that of “a self-employed polymath.” He wrote, “As a polymath, what I do now is very much what I have always done (I mostly ignored traditional schooling, even when I was forced to go); I do anything and everything that catches my

attention. Life is about learning, growing, and sharing your discoveries with others who want to learn and grow too.”

His list of jobs held over the years includes, but is not limited to, the following: research and development consultant for a medical manufacturing company; clinical hypnotherapist; master practitioner of neuro-linguistic programming; director of tutoring services for a community college; wilderness survival, first aid, and bushcraft expert; PADI divemaster (scuba diving) instructor; martial arts instructor (Kung Fu, Judo, and Jeet Kun Do); and author of two published children’s books (and currently working on a new series of bedtime stories).

They chose enjoyable and meaningful careers over potentially more lucrative careers.

This generalization overlaps considerably with the previous one, about careers as extensions of childhood interests. Unschooling children play, explore, and observe in the real world and find their passions. Then they pursue those passions in adult vocations and careers, or they may find new passions and pursue them. A number said that their lives as adults were not much different from their earlier lives as unschoolers, as they continued to play, explore, and learn. In response to our question about whether they were financially independent, many responded that they could support themselves only because they lived frugally, but they would rather live frugally and pursue their interests than make more money at a job that didn’t interest them.

The four case examples above illustrate this second generalization – about pursuing enjoyable and meaningful careers – as much as they do the first generalization. Here are three more exam-

ples, however, in which the career reflects not so much the specific activities of childhood as a set of ideals, or social concerns, that began to take root in childhood.

Greenpeace activist and community organizer:

This woman, age twenty-eight at the time of the survey, was one of the more schooled participants in our survey. She attended public school through age thirteen and then refused to go any more, and so was unschooled after that. As a child she immersed herself in art, but she was also interested in “revolutions and wildlife.” I suspect that her school refusal was itself a sign of her revolutionary spirit. She went to art college, with the support of a substantial scholarship awarded on the

basis of her portfolio, and then taught art for a number of years. But then she shifted careers to her other great interest and became a full-time Greenpeace activist, fundraiser, and manager. In response to our question about supporting herself financially, she wrote: “Yep, I make a modest salary. I didn’t exactly chose my job because it’s the highest paying. It’s more important to me that I spend my time doing something that benefits my community.”

Founder of an environmentally- and socially-responsible construction company:

This woman, age thirty at the time of the survey, had never gone to school but was homeschooled up to age “thirteen or fourteen,” when full unschooling began. She wrote: “I am an owner/employee of a construction company.... The company is a direct reflection of many of my interests and activities as an unschooled youth – for example, democracy in the workplace,

“I do anything and everything that catches my attention. Life is about learning, growing, and sharing your discoveries with others who want to learn and grow too.”



Photo © Cadmon Witty/Natural Living Magazine

“The main advantage of unschooling was that it supported me in understanding myself clearly, and helping me craft an adult life that is meaningful to me. I do not identify as ever having stopped unschooling – I am continuing to learn as much as I did as a youth.

environmental stewardship, construction and building, facilitation, and project management.

“I am also the president of a small non-profit that works to support the use of alternative materials in construction through the development of technical guidelines. I am the project manager for our technical guideline project and coordinate with our diverse teams of supporters around the world. My interest in regulation and policy development, as well as a commitment to support the use of environmentally friendly alternative building materials, are both directly connected to interests and projects I undertook as an unschooled young adult.

“I completed a series of internships over three years ... during which I studied permaculture, natural building, community facilitation, and conflict resolution. ...

“The main advantage of unschooling was that it supported me in understanding myself clearly, and helping me craft an adult life that is meaningful to me. I do not identify as ever having stopped unschooling – I am continuing to learn as much as I did as a youth. When I was fifteen, I was studying microscopes and nuclear particles, and now I am studying non-profit bylaws and building codes, or training for a marathon. I am thirty years old, and I have been practicing how to run my life, be motivated towards my own goals, think creatively about how to solve problems, and seek out what interests me for twenty years. I find myself consistently in an advantageous position compared to my ‘schooled’ peers...”

Urban planner, with focus on non-motorized transportation design:

This thirty-year-old person, who was entirely unschooled from K-12, self-identified as gender queer and preferred not to be classed as either male or female. After completing a bachelor’s degree program, this person held jobs that reflected the person’s interests in planning, management, and urban development. These included assistant town planner in a small city, administrative assistant for a public health department at an Ivy League university, research assistant for a project involving bicycle transportation (while a graduate student), program coordinator for a low-income housing non-profit, and post-graduate research

fellow for the Bureau of Transportation at a large city. This person wrote:

“My goal is to build a career in either bicycle and pedestrian transportation planning/policy or in human factors engineering... My interests have typically come in short, intense cycles. I figured this out when I was about sixteen and started researching career options that would let me change projects every few months.

At seventeen, I discovered urban design, which has acted as a thematic connection for a lot of my more passing interests over the last decade. As a topic, it connects to some of the things I enjoyed as a teenager – theater set design, model building, textile design, ecology – but it took moving from the rural areas where I grew up to [name of large city deleted] before I really understood what it was that interested me about design. My path since then has been twisty but

generally linear. I studied pre-architecture and drafting at community college, got into architecture and urban design at college, wrote a thesis on post-socialist urban planning policy in Vietnam and Hungary in undergrad, worked in a town planning office for a while, and got interested in my current specialties of non-motorized transportation and qualitative research methods for analyzing travel behavior once I started grad school....”

A high percentage chose careers in the creative arts.

By our coding, thirty-six (forty-eight percent) of the seventy-five survey participants were pursuing careers that we categorized as in the creative arts –a category that included fine arts, crafts, photog-

raphy, film, theater, and writing. Remarkably, nineteen (seventy-nine percent) of the twenty-four participants in the always-unschooled group were pursuing such careers. The observation that the always-unschooled participants were more likely to pursue careers in the creative arts than were the other participants was highly significant statistically. I could speculate about possible reasons for

such a higher concentration of creative artists in the always-unschooled group than in the other groups, but, truthfully, your guess is as good as mine. Here, as illustration, are three examples of respondents pursuing such careers.

Production manager at a large theater company:

This twenty-nine-year-old woman, who was unschooled for all of K-12 but had gone on to a bachelor’s degree in theatre arts, wrote: “I am a working artist and the production manager

of [a major theater company in New York]. I feel like the way I was raised led directly to what I do now. The tools I learned as a child – to pursue new ideas/interests/knowledge, to creatively solve problems, to actively participate in my community, and more – have helped me greatly. It’s actually pretty much what I still do, just in the context of a grown-up life. The organizing, lighting design, dancing, making things is exactly what I was doing as a child and teen.”

To our question about financial independence, she wrote: “NYC is a hard city to live in, but I have been financially independent the whole time since graduating from college in 2008. I have never had trouble finding work. I gravitate to experimental performance and work with/for a lot of artists. My

“The tools I learned as a child – to pursue new ideas/interests/knowledge, to creatively solve problems, to actively participate in my community, and more – have helped me greatly. It’s actually pretty much what I still do, just in the context of a grown-up life.”

fees are not high. But it's worth it to me to work on projects that I find interesting and believe in."

Textile artist/crafter and entrepreneur:

This twenty-one-year-old woman, who was unschooled for all of K-12 and had pursued no higher education, wrote: "I'm a self employed artist/crafter; I sell online and locally. I am absolutely doing what I was interested in as a child! I've always been making things; I love what I do."

In response to our question about financial independence, she wrote: "Yes. I became financially independent at age nineteen and have maintained that (now twenty-one) It is very important to me to make a good living and I feel very proud watching my income rise little by little each year. As an unschooled adult I felt pressured to succeed professionally because people doubted I could/would, also to show my younger siblings what that looks like for us."

Self-employed piano and violin instructor and aspiring performer:

This twenty-eight-year-old woman, who was homeschooled to age ten and unschooled after that, had two jobs at the time she responded to the survey. One was that of self-employed web designer, a business she had maintained for about ten years. The other – and more significant job to her – was that of self-employed piano and violin instructor, which she had been doing for about seven years.

Concerning the latter, she wrote: "This is my career path, and I have built it all myself.... I currently have thirty-one students. I teach one-on-one private lessons, teaching pieces/ songs, theory, ear training, music history, composition, technique, performance, and share my passion for music. I love my job!"



Photo © B Calkins/Shutterstock

"I run my own business, and it brings in enough income to comfortably sustain a living in an expensive area."

In response to our question about financial independence, she wrote: "Yes. I run my own business, and it brings in enough income to comfortably sustain a living in the expensive area of [name of city deleted]. 'Making a good living' is very important to me. But the way I look at making a good living is as follows: Being financially responsible for my own life and affording the things that are important to me. And most importantly, doing this in a way that brings me joy."

In concluding her response to our career question, she wrote: "I love my current career as a music teacher, but I am also aspiring to perform with my band as a second career path. I play bass and sing in this band, and next week we are heading in to the studio to record a full-length album that we raised the money for through a Kickstarter campaign... We are continuing to work toward our goals with this record, making touring plans..., and looking over an offer from a record label."

A high percentage were entrepreneurs.

Respondents were coded as being entrepreneurs if they had started their own business and

were making a living at it or working toward making a living at it. This category overlapped greatly with the creative arts category, as many were in the business of selling their own creative arts or services. Overall, by our coding, forty (fifty-three percent) of the respondents were entrepreneurs. This percentage, too, was greatest for those in the always-unschooled group (sixty-three percent), but in this case the difference across groups did not approach statistical significance. A number of the case examples presented above are also examples of entrepreneurship.

Sociologists who have studied work satisfaction have found that the kinds of jobs and careers that are most satisfying to people are those that involve a great deal of occupational self-direction. One thing that is eminently clear from our study is that the unschoolers who responded to our survey had, overwhelmingly, chosen careers very high in this quality. They were, by enlarge, working for themselves or in work environments where they were their own bosses. No big surprise here: People who opted out of top-down schooling, where they would be the underlings doing work dictated to them by others, generally opted out of that in their careers also.

A high percentage, especially of men, chose STEM careers.

We had not initially thought of coding the careers to see how many were in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) category, but did so after the question was raised in a comment on the first post. We used the definition of STEM published by the National Science Foundation, which is broader than some, and includes social

sciences as well as natural sciences, technology, engineering, and math. However, we only included people in the social sciences if they were conducting research in that realm and/or were doing applied work that made use of technical aspects of a social science. As we did with other analyses, Gina and I first coded independently and then compared notes and resolved differences in discussion.

Overall, by our coding, twenty-two (twenty-nine percent) of the seventy-five participants were pursuing STEM careers. When we broke this down by gender (leaving out the person who did not wish to be classified by gender), we found that thirteen (twenty-two percent) of the fifty-eight women and eight (fifty percent) of the sixteen men in the sample were coded as having STEM careers. De-

spite the relatively small number of men in the sample, this difference in ratio is statistically significant. Apparently, the tendency for men to go into such careers at a higher rate than women, which has been well established for the general population, occurs among unschoolers as well.

The majority of those in STEM in our sample were in some aspect of engineering or computer technology, but the sample also included an archaeologist, field biologist, math and science teacher, intelligence analyst, and four involved in various aspects of medical technology.

*Peter Gray, Ph.D. is a research professor at Boston College and the author of the book *Free to Learn* (Basic Books 2013). He wrote about this research on his blog at www.psychologytoday.com/blog/freedom-learn. and will be posting future updates there.*

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“Apparently, the tendency for men to go into such careers [science, technology, engineering, math] at a higher rate than women, which has been well established for the general population, occurs among unschoolers as well.”

Learning
how to be
self-directed



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The Benefits of Self-Directed Time

New research correlates less-structured time to kids' success

One of the criticisms of life learning is that kids need structure of the sort found in schools to learn how to function in the “real world.” Of course, we all know that school is not the real world and that learning without school doesn’t preclude structure. But, sometimes, our trust in the principle that kids know what’s best for themselves can wear a bit thin. If that happens, we can take comfort in a psychological study released earlier this year. It found that children with less-structured time who spend more time engaged in more open-ended, free-flowing activities are likely to show more “self-directed executive

functioning.” (The converse was found to be true too: Children in more structured activities displayed lower executive functioning abilities.)

What exactly is “executive function?” you ask. Well, here is how the authors of the study (published in the open source journal *Frontiers in Psychology* – www.frontiersin.org/Psychology – in June, 2014) describe it.

“Why do young children often forget (or outright refuse) to put on a coat before leaving the house on a snowy day? The choice to put on a jacket may seem frustratingly obvious to parents and older siblings, but this simple

decision arises from a surprisingly complex interplay of behaviors. Children must keep in mind a goal (staying warm and dry) that is not yet relevant in the comfort of a warm house. They must inhibit the urge to proceed with a regular sequence of tasks (put on socks and shoes and head out the door), and instead modify their routine to include something new (pulling a coat from the closet). Unless someone intervenes, this change in the status quo must be accomplished without any external reminders (a visible coat, or a well-timed reminder from a caregiver). To accomplish each of these tasks, children must engage executive functions (EFs), the cognitive control processes that regulate thought and action in support of goal-directed behavior. EFs develop dramatically during childhood, and support a number of higher-level cognitive processes, including planning and decision-making, maintenance and manipulation of information in memory, inhibition of unwanted thoughts, feelings, and actions, and flexible shifting from one task to another.”

Not only does executive function help kids to manage behavior (like a self-directed child putting on a coat just before going outside without being told to do), but previous research has shown that it also predicts future outcomes such as academic performance, health, wealth, and criminality.

There is a growing body of research into adult-directed, structured programs and activities (such as are found in most Montessori classrooms) designed to improve children’s executive functioning. However, in this study, doctoral and undergraduate researchers at the University of Colorado, Boulder, wondered if children’s self-directed EFs might benefit from participation in less struc-

tured activities, where children, rather than adults, choose what they will do and when. “Less-structured activities” included free play, family and social events, reading, drawing, and media time. Researchers followed seventy six- and seven-year-old children, measuring their activities using a well-established verbal fluency test. A pre-determined classification system categorized activities as physical or non-physical, structured and unstructured.

“Less-structured time may uniquely support the development of self-directed control by affording children with ... practice in carrying out goal-directed actions using internal cues and reminders.”

They found that “children who spent more time in less-structured activities displayed better self-directed control, even after controlling for age, verbal ability, and household income.” The authors also wrote,

“These findings represent the first demonstration that time spent in a broad range of less-structured activities outside of formal schooling predicts goal-directed behaviors not ex-

PLICITLY specified by an adult, and that more time spent in structured activities predicts poorer such goal-directed behavior... Less-structured time may uniquely support the development of self-directed control by affording children with ... practice in carrying out goal-directed actions using internal cues and reminders. That is, less-structured activities may give children more self-directed opportunities. From this perspective, structured time could slow the development of self-directed control, since adults in such scenarios can provide external cues and reminders about what should happen, and when.”

One important caveat is that this study merely proves correlation, not causation, which will be the subject of future research. But it does provide life learners with some assurance that structure is not all it’s made out to be.

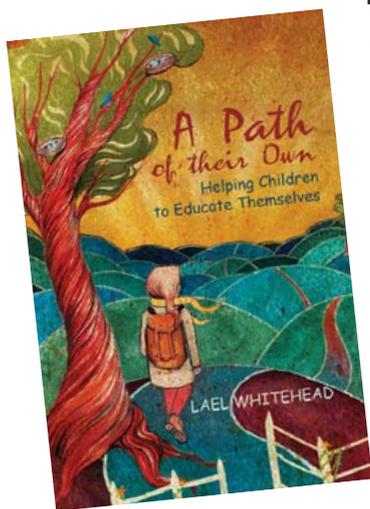
News and Resources



Information and inspiration
for your life learning journey.

Helping Kids Thrive

Once we've begun to trust our children to follow their own learning paths, we often find that it comes naturally to extend that trust to other aspects of life. Hence, many life learners combine compassionate parenting with unschooling, and that's the focus of a



new book entitled *A Path of Their Own: Helping Children Educate Themselves* by Lael Whitehead (Granville Island Publishing, 2014).

The author (www.laelwhitehead.com) is the mother of three grown life learners and has written for this magazine in the past. She calls this “radical respect” and describes it as seeing children “as they are, and not as we might wish them to be.”

One of the strengths of this book is the way Whitehead candidly shares stories from her own family's experi-

ence. She describes how she took her children out of school and allowed them to learn from life in a natural, self-directed way, without curriculum, grades, discipline, or rewards. And, each step of the way, she shares her thoughts, feelings and, sometimes, her misgivings about what's happening with her daughters. Included are equally candid essays by her daughters, where they share glimpses of their current lives and their feelings about their childhood lives.

I was honored to write the foreword to this book. And here's part of what I wrote: “Lael Whitehead – with her relentless questioning, her strong belief in children and in life, her brave mind and open heart – has written a testament to how respecting children can lead to a radical and restorative change in how we live, one that is a kinder, gentler, more thoughtful, and more life-affirming.”

I think you'll find *A Path of Their Own* an inspiring and thought-provoking read, no matter where you are on your own journey.

News for Kids

Two California mothers (with backgrounds in engineering and the financial world) have created a free website where children can learn about international current events without being subject to the sensationalism, bias, and sometimes age-inappropriate content found in mainstream media.

The site www.youngzine.org aims to be an interactive community of children and adults who recognize the importance of living in this highly interconnected age where our actions have far reaching impact. Children are encouraged to express their views, submit articles, book reviews or travelogues, and all content is moderated by the editorial team. Like adult-focused news sites, the content ranges from world news to science and technology, environment, and the arts.

The site's presentation and content nurtures open-mindedness and curiosity about what's shaping the world. The articles are presented in a factual manner that isn't condescending, and seem to be aimed at readers with relatively good comprehension levels. In addition to the serious news stories, the site contains fun trivia, compelling visuals, and videos. ▶

New Homeschooling Film

Class Dismissed: a film about learning outside the classroom – www.homeschoolfilm.com – is a long-awaited production directed and produced by Californian film professional and father Jeremy Stuart. Due to be released in October, it explores school-free learning as a viable alternative to the industrial school model.

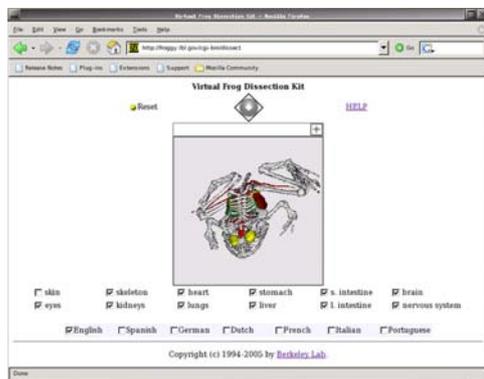
The crowd-funded, full-length documentary follows an “ordinary” California family with two daughters as they move from school to home education, at the request of the oldest girl. We watch, sometimes painfully, as they struggle to deschool themselves and discover which of the many educational styles works best for both the girls and the parents. Along the way, we learn about everything from classical homeschooling to charter schooling, learning centers, and uschooling.

Interspersed with vignettes from the family’s journey is frank narrative commentary about the problems with schooling, and – perhaps best of all – abundant footage of and articulate comments by school-free kids. There are also insights and advice from a virtual barrage of familiar faces in the American homeschooling movement, and even a cut from a vintage taped interview with the late John Holt.

I recently viewed a rough cut of the film; I found it to be well-researched, professionally filmed and produced, engrossing, and helpful. *Class Dismissed* will be a convincing introduction to home-based learning and a myth demolisher for those not familiar with it, as well as an encouraging friend to new homeschoolers. Congratulations to Stuart and his team for a terrific in-depth look at this still-revolutionary idea of education. I appreciate their focus on children and their learning rather than on tinkering with or justifying an outdated system.

Online Biology

Animal dissections can be helpful for learning biology. But there are ethical and economic reasons to avoid them. Fortunately, an Internet search will turn up a variety of virtual dissections and photographs that can also be educational.



For example, the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory’s Whole Frog Project at www.froggy.lbl.gov provides high school level study of the anatomy of a frog. It utilizes data from high resolution MRI and mechanical sectioning, together with 3D software to visualize the anatomical structure of the animal. Designed to demonstrate the technology as much as to illustrate the parts of a frog, the project does the latter capably in seven languages.

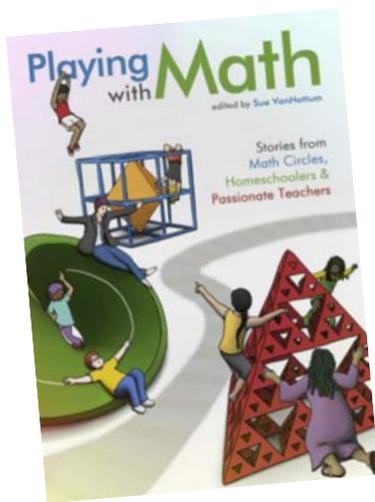


Online Learning Sites

If you’ve been following this column for any length of time, you’ll know that I often share sources of online courses. They seem to be mushrooming in number these days and it’s hard to keep up – and probably not necessary, since there are lots of sources out there aside from Google searches.

Nevertheless, here are a few more! Alison – www.alison.com – says it’s “The Original MOOC.” And, founded in 2007, it could well be. It currently offers courses at both certificate and diploma level, with over six hundred free courses, and has offices in England, Ireland, and the U.S.

Looking for more? Check out www.noexcuselist.com. ▶



Fun With Math

For most of us, school teaches that math is hard. For some of us (lots of us female), school teaches that we can't do math. Those myths are something that plagued me all through school but my life learning daughters taught me otherwise. They learned math through play, and when they tried out formal education, they found it relatively easy to superimpose the language of math onto their natural understanding of the concepts. That, of course, set them aside from their always-schooled peers.

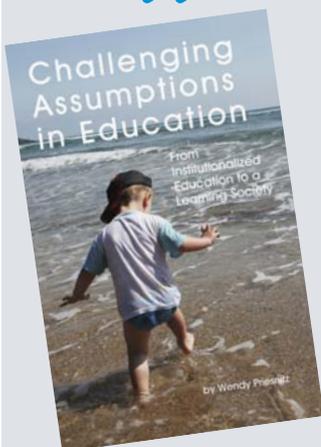
Those myths and many others are demolished in a wonderful crowd-funded book to be published later this fall, entitled *Playing With Math: Stories from Math Circles, Homeschoolers & Passionate Teachers*, edited by Sue VanHattum (Delta Stream Media, 2014).

VanHattum is a math professor, blogger, mother, author/editor, and fundraiser. And she's put all those roles to work enthusiastically in this book. Her dedication to empowering kids to take charge of their learning and for making math fun and accessible to kids shines through her work.

Playing With Math has sections devoted to stories by homeschoolers, teachers, and those participating in math circles and groups. There are games, examples, activities, personal stories, and much more sprinkled throughout.

From the pre-publication copy I read, it's clear that this will be exciting for others who want to share their love of math with kids. It will also be inspiring for those who are looking for ideas to overturn their own phobias and instead to live math – to regain the joy that our little ones display when they learn to count...everything in sight. Have fun!

Challenge our society's assumptions about children and schooling...and reaffirm why you chose the alternative.



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by Wendy Priesnitz, editor of Life Learning Magazine

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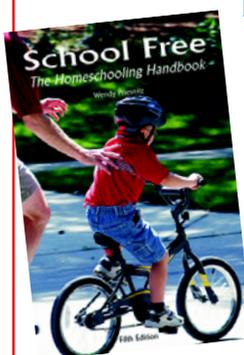
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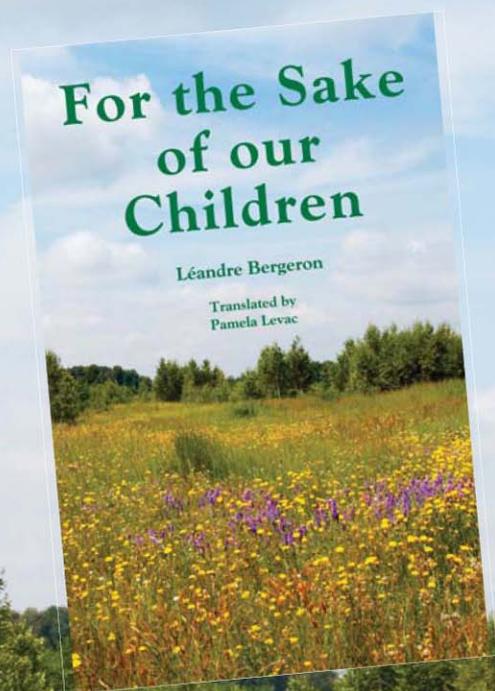
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***A passionate and inspiring memoir
about helping children to be born, grow, and
learn with respect and without coercion***



The author's ruminations about attachment parenting and unschooling are woven throughout a series of journal entries describing the daily life of a family of three daughters – from the naturalness of home birth and breastfeeding on demand, through unschooling and working together on a small farm and in the family's natural food store. The result is a wonderfully warm, sometimes funny, always wise potpourri of advice and inspiration about natural parenting and unschooling. This book provides both rationale for and proof of the wisdom of choosing a path that is so little trod upon in our world – the path of freedom, of respect for our children, of trust in them, and belief in their ability to regulate and educate themselves.

Léandre Bergeron's many works range from a French language guide to home birth to the well-known *Dictionnaire de la langue québécoise* and the best-seller, *Petit Manuel d'histoire du Québec*, which has recently been updated and re-released. He is a tireless champion for the underdog and has long advocated for educational, political and social reform.

"A profoundly revolutionary narrative."

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For the Sake of Our Children

by **Léandre Bergeron**

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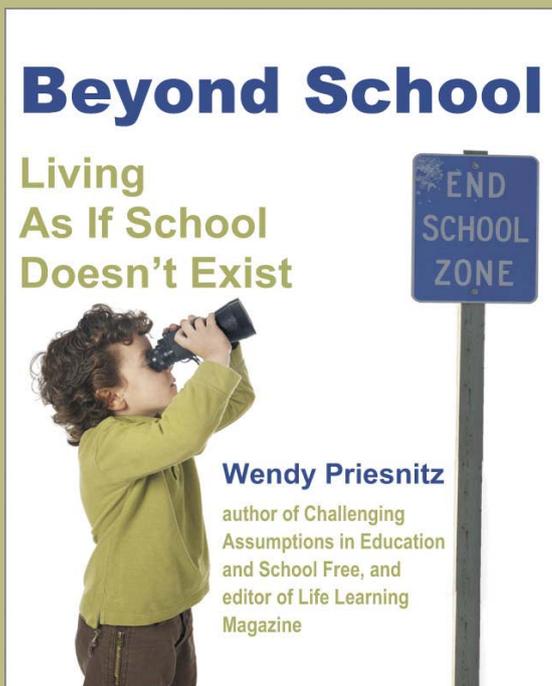
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