



## Unschooling And Academic Education 2

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 21 January, 2006 - 17:11

Posted on the Learning List (a radical unschooling list which unfortunately no longer exists) on Tue, 1 Nov., 1994, at 21:00:00 +0000

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

[This is the second post in a thread. The first post is [here](#).]



A poster wrote:

*Well, I have a theory that says reading is important for children in the abstract. I don't see how that inevitably leads to coercion, because I also have a theory that says that coercion does irreparable intellectual harm.*

It depends what you mean by “reading is important for children.” If it is just a factual thing – if you mean that many children think it important (like I'd say “computer games are important for children”) – then I see no problem; but if you mean that reading is more important for children than they want it – that children are mistaken – I think it will lead to coercion.

*I think this analogy with feeding our children is powerful. We have ideas about the variety of things needed for both physical and intellectual development. We want to see our children acquire the nourishment, but we also want them to develop the ability to choose and prepare the things that will sustain them throughout their lives. Traditional schooling in this analogy is the study of how to physically cram food into the mouths of unwilling and uninterested children. It may, at great pain, get some food into them, but it is entirely destructive to the ends of teaching them to feed themselves well. Alternative education is the study of persuading, cajoling, or fooling children into eating and in general fails almost as badly.*

Okay, we agree thus far, and if you truly believe everything up to here, you can't really go wrong. But the trouble is, the analogy slightly breaks down here.

*What I am searching for is the intellectual analogue to cooking for our families. How do we preserve the nutrients, destroy the toxins, and yet make things appealing and healthful? When presented with a variety of healthful food children will meet their dietary needs, and I believe that children will meet their intellectual needs if presented with a variety of healthful and nourishing ideas.*

To understand the answer to this question, you must first understand what the differences are. Ideas, unlike food, are not a substance, and it is not true that the quality of an idea experience depends upon the problem of how to give the child as many as possible of the good and as few as possible of the bad. That would be censoring the ideas to which the child is exposed.

If one rejects traditional education because of its coerciveness, and one rejects alternative education for its having a preconceived idea of what children need leading to manipulation rather than outright coercion, the question then arises, what *should* one do? What positively can one do? I think the food analogy falls down badly on this positive side. Knowledge is not transferred from the parents to the children in the same sense that food is. Furthermore, the criteria by which theories can be judged worthy of learning are not analogous to the food ones. For instance, there may be truth in a bad theory, or the bad theory may nevertheless be better than one's previous theory, and one may need a stepping stone towards a better theory. All these things have no analogue to food. If you taste enough of a bad foodstuff, it will kill you; if you hear enough of a bad idea, it won't kill you. No matter how much of a bad theory one "tastes," it will still be subject to criticism, and one can still abandon it.

*The dietary needs of children are different from adults, and especially for the youngest ones, they need a diet that is almost totally separate from the rest of the family. Is this not true of children's intellectual needs? The cook must (within the constraints of time and funds)*

This carries with it the suggestion that those are fixed rather than negotiable.

*attempt to meet the needs of the whole family, because the children are not born equipped to do this for themselves. At some point children become independent for their food needs,*

It would be more analogous if we were talking about the food somehow being created jointly by the parents and children. If we were talking about a family on a farm, in which the child milks the cow, it is not the parent who directly provides the milk, but the child. But had the parent not provided the cow, the child would have had no cow to milk. So in this analogy, the parent's role can be seen as providing the cow to milk.

*The analogy also shows me that my earlier question about how we can help our children learn is as general and difficult to answer as "how do I cook?" But saying that teaching is irrelevant to learning seems to me to be like saying that cooking is irrelevant to eating.*

First we need to patch up this analogy. Some eating does not involve cooking at all, although it does involve, say, picking an apple from a tree, for example. So this analogy assumes that teaching is like cooking in this sense: everything that is eaten has to be cooked/prepared/picked; by analogy, everything that is learned has to be taught. That is a false analogy. A better analogy would be: "saying that teaching is irrelevant to learning is like saying that regurgitation is irrelevant to eating." Regurgitation is the analogue of teaching: making the child eat something which you have already eaten. In fact learning does not require teaching and eating does not require regurgitation. But even if your analogy were in fact true (if we accept that cooking is relevant to eating) teaching is not relevant to learning. Because actually we don't learn by being taught; we learn ourselves. What we learn is absolutely not the knowledge that is in the teacher's mind. When we do learn through interaction with another person, what we learn is not the knowledge the other person has: it is the knowledge we ourselves *create*.

*I am not advocating forcing people to learn specific things*

That is a very interesting form of words, because it is impossible to force someone to do something that is not specific. You can only force someone to do a specific thing. So I wonder why you say you do not advocate forcing people to learn *specific* things? (It reminds me of parents who say, "Well I don't mind *what* GCSEs you take, so long as you take ten of them.")

*I must point out that at times the chain of things that one must learn to be part of a field is quite long.*

But why should one be part of a field if one doesn't want to? If one *does* want to, then what is the content of saying one has to learn a long chain of things? One *wants* to learn the long chain of things.

*Breaking a link early on makes it very difficult to catch up later.*

That is just not true, as any number of people who have done so will tell you.

*I know people who are fascinated by astronomy but who can't fully participate even at the amateur level because they are weak in gradeschool math.*

The question is, why do people become weak in grade school maths. Usually because they are forced to do it. If they were not forced to do it, why couldn't they learn it at any age? It is extremely easy for anyone who wants to learn it.

*No one apparently ever pointed out to them that comet watching needs Newtonian mechanics, which requires calculus and*

On the contrary, it was probably pointed out to them hundreds of times by the people who tried to force them to learn gradeschool maths. For some reason they didn't listen.

*One can of course go back and learn these things as an adult but it is not easy.*

That is not true. The things one finds difficult to learn as an adult are precisely the things one was forced to learn as a child. Everything else is easy to learn as an adult.

*There is a natural order to these things.*

That is only relevant here if you take it for granted that the early things in this natural order won't be learnt spontaneously through interest in the subject. Here is an example: astronomy is at the end of the chain. That is the

exciting, interesting thing, but you have got to learn this boring gradeschool maths first. You would *prefer* to tell the children this and have them do this boring thing of their own accord, because they really want to learn the interesting bit – astronomy – but what if they don't listen to you?

Sarah Fitz-Claridge: “The fact that teachers were offering them this formal instruction as their only outlet for this impulse, does not prove that there are not outlets which are infinitely better than this. For instance, if they had considered this important, and, say, found a graduate student to come in to the school to talk to the children for a few hours a week, then they would have been able to do without formal instruction, and the children would have learned even more.”

Here you are asserting the truth of the proposition we are trying to establish. How is a graduate student different from any other type of instructor? Why would they have learned more?

I had in mind not an instructor, but someone passionate about the subject, someone who would merely be available for conversation about it, answering the children's real moment-by-moment questions. It is *that* that would have made them learn more.

*At first, a baby's primary task is to interpret the sensory chaos that surrounds him. Eyes focus, brain begins to hear sounds, and then to break sounds into words. Words become associated with things and with concepts. Different tools are needed to deal with complex abstractions such as “the fall of Rome” than are needed to learn to walk.*

The examples you give here are examples of actual *theories* being different, not of differences in the *way* the child learns. For instance, by “different tools,” you mean different theoretical tools. Although different theories are needed, the logic of scientific discovery is the same for all those theories. The substantive theories change, but the nature of learning must be the same for everything. It can't be different for theories and meta-theories, because epistemology has the structure that it can't be true of object theories and not also true of meta-theories.

*Why do you introduce the idea of making people do things?*

You have told us what you are searching for – the intellectual analogue of cooking for our families. Now what we have to ask is, why is the issue of what order people learn things in, important? Why is it important to your wanting to know what to do for your children? There is nothing that hangs on that question about what one should learn first, unless you think that the children will make the wrong decision about what to learn first. If you are not going to make them do things then the only effect of them making the wrong decision in your eyes is to make you think, “Well, they are making the wrong decision.” How can it possibly enter into what you do?

Let's take the analogy we have been using. It is like a cook or parent saying, “Okay, I reject the traditional view that I should decide what my children eat, and make them eat it. I have even passed the avant-garde stage of saying I should decide what my children eat and then *persuade* them to eat it. I have decided that I am not going to make them eat anything at all – it is they who will decide what to eat. But that still leaves me with the problem of what to cook.” Now, what you then ask is, “One of the things I worry about is that the children might eat bad food” – let's say for the sake of argument food without sufficient vitamins – “and that it won't be immediately obvious to them that this is bad, but it may have long-term consequences.”

The reply to that is that you can tell them about the possible consequences of not getting enough vitamins. You might answer, “Well yes, but what I worry about is that when they are choosing *freely* what to eat, they may systematically just choose the wrong thing in a particular way.” Let's set aside for a moment the question of whether you are right or wrong about this (I think you are wrong, as it happens), but I want to ask a different question. I want to ask you: how is this

relevant to your question *what should you cook them?* Unless you are thinking in terms of coercing them, why don't you just cook them whatever food you think they'll like best? This theory that they won't learn the right things is not some random theory that you have picked up: it is a justification for coercion. There is no other point to that theory. So my answer to your question is that your statement about the idea that children might not learn the relevant things is only important if you are wondering whether to coerce them or not. If you know you are not going to coerce them, you need not address that issue at all. In other words, it was not I who introduced this idea of making people do things, but (implicitly) you.

*...there times when ...you must simply memorise the data. ...You could try to get through the field without ever memorising methyl- ethyl- propyl-, and if your interest in chemistry were mild you could probably get away with looking up names or asking someone when you became confused. Anyone with a serious interest in the field will find that a few hours spent just memorising the names systematically will pay off many times over down the road.*

If it is true that anyone with a serious interest in the field will find that a few hours spent just memorising the names systematically will pay off many times over down the road, then what are we arguing about? That will be obvious to the person himself. Or are you saying that one can't *get* a serious interest in those fields without first memorising those things? It is definitely not true that memorisation is a prerequisite to a serious interest in anything. I think it would be better to have said that if one's interest in chemistry is at all deep, one will learn methyl- ethyl- propyl- whether one intends to or not. This idea of yours is not relevant unless you are considering coercion.

*I'm not advocating that students be made to memorise this stuff -- I am saying that for some their lives will be easier if they do,*

That is the wrong way round. If they like it, they will learn it.

*even for those people that the memorisation process will not necessarily be either be easy nor interesting. Some things worth doing take effort.*

That just is not true. It will be both easy and interesting. Some things worth doing do indeed take effort, but it is pleasant effort, not unpleasant effort.

Perhaps you should at least consider the possibility that some of your own methods and practices with regard to learning are not "natural" or "ideal" but just part of your method for coping with your own education. If we admit that our own education was harmful, we should think about what happened, what coping strategies we evolved: we ought to fully expect ourselves not to resemble people who have not been harmed. (If you say that your education has not harmed you, why should you be opposed to that form of education?)

*I am not saying that reason does not work. In some cases, however, the value of a thing is hard to see. One area in which most children's reasoning skills seem to be weaker than most adults (note qualifiers!) is in understanding the long-term consequences of actions. It may be more of a matter of experience than reason, so the question becomes "how can we allow children to benefit from our experiences?"*

By talking to them. But the whole thrust of what you are saying carries an implicit suggestion that mere talking is not enough. BTW, I do not accept that children are qualitatively deficient in ability to understand long-term consequences of actions. Where they give that impression, I think you'll find merely that they lack information.

*I am not "forcing" children to learn one or more techniques – I am showing them some specific techniques that people have found useful for solving problems in the past.*

I think you have got to face this question about forcing: if you fail to understand, for instance, why learning will be pleasant and interesting, you will indeed end up coercing people for whose learning you are responsible. It is true that it is possible that you could persuade some people some of the time to do some things they don't find interesting, but it is hard to believe that would work across the board. If you have decided that a child for whom you are responsible would be greatly benefited by learning something, but the child refuses to do so, you will indeed coerce him, because your reasons for not coercing him won't be enough. You might think that you will be able to avoid resorting to coercion, but you have this concern that people might make the wrong decisions about what to learn, and that concern embodies a justification for coercion. One can't sustain such a position. Sooner or later, you'll either resolve your conflict and realise that your fears are mistaken. Or the issue will become more important as time goes on, until you feel compelled to resort to coercion. It takes *work* not to coerce someone.

*When I question the idea that teaching is irrelevant, I am not making the assertion that teaching is essential.*

I thought you were, because you compared it with cooking. Cooking is in fact essential for some foods.

*I am asking what relationships are useful between those who seek knowledge and those who already know something. Neither making the latter masters of the former nor keeping the two separate seems to be the right solution.*

I should like to stress that I fully accept that you are asking a good and genuine question here, and that you are not just trying to find excuses to coerce children. You are (intellectually) worrying about all this, and the end result of this worrying will be coercion unless you really understand why you are mistaken.

to post comments

## Comments

### **I agree with some computer**

*Submitted by Rose on 4 March, 2008 - 01:32*

I agree with some computer games are important for children, 79% of American children now play computer or video games on a regular basis, some **puzzle games** (<http://www.softsea.com/software/Puzzle-Games.html>), these logic games challenge children mind, it are good for children.

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