



Unschooling And Academic Education 3

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 21 January, 2006 - 17:29

Posted on the Learning List (a radical unschooling List which unfortunately no longer exists) on Mon, 7 Nov., 1994, at 11:13:00 +0000

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

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



You said that you would like to see someone construct an explicit argument for any of six propositions you then listed. As someone

who is reasonably convinced, on the basis of your own statements, that you *are* coercive, I am interested in responding to your challenge, even though I agree with you that every one of your six propositions is false. I hope you won't take this as a personal insult, because in my scheme of things, it is to be *expected* that one will fail to be perfectly non-coercive, no matter how hard one tries.

Before explaining further, I'd like to state more fully what I mean by coercion, which I suspect is rather different from what you mean by it. Again, this is not a rigorous definition, but a list of behaviours which are coercive by my definition.

By "behaving non-coercively towards a child," I take it that the child is allowed to do or not do as he thinks best, *not only* without being punished (physically or psychologically) but without having *any* sanction imposed upon him whatsoever, including being hit, being scolded, having sad faces made at him, being told he has disappointed you, and so on – indeed, I would assume that you are *helping* him to do this thing (or to avoid doing the thing he doesn't want to do) to the best of your ability.

We shall probably disagree about whether treating children in these coercive ways is right. The chances are that you (and most other unschoolers on this list) will answer that it is natural, inevitable, desirable and unavoidable that children should be treated in some of these ways some of the time or disaster will result. Why do I think that? Well, here are two anecdotes of yours that suggest it:

(1) In the past you have taught children to swim who do not want to be there: I don't know whether you would do that today, but if you would, and don't consider it that coercive, this illustrates a difference between my use of the term and yours.

(2) Sitting at your computer screen with your child you do not tell him about alt.barney.die.die.die. That may or may not be coercive in my scheme of things: it depends on things you haven't told us, most importantly, on whether you think he would *prefer* to read, or to know of the existence of, such a newsgroup. But in any case the situation jars with me

because, as someone else remarked, “the problem is that you continue to assume that you, the parent... must take the initiative – that the student is somehow impaired and the whole process depends on your finding a solution to his problem.” In other words you are totally construing the situation as one in which *you* decide what happens, moreover that your criterion is *not* your child's preferences (*now*), but what *you* think he should be learning, now. I should be entirely occupied in that situation wondering which newsgroups he would like most (or whether he would like to do something else).

What I should be trying to do would be to give him the best possible time today, now, where “best” is defined by *his* values. This does not necessarily mean he would be having rip-roaring enjoyment the whole time; it just means that he would be doing what he prefers to do, by his values. He won't always want rip-roaring fun; he won't always want “interest” (narrowly construed), because sometimes he'll be doing things in order to achieve other things in the future. But he will be valuing those future achievements today, *by his present values*.

So if we are going to discuss the issue of whether you are going to be “coercive,” and you want to say that what I define as refraining from coercion is going over the top, then let me just use a different word: you tell me what word to use for the things I want to avoid doing, and I shall use that word from now on. Let's then agree that you would *not* be coercive (in your sense), whereas I too would not be coercive in your sense, but I would also refrain from a further range of things which you (and most other unschoolers) *would* do.

Again, when I say I “would” do none of them, I mean I intend not to. I try to work towards not doing so. I repeat, it is part of my scheme of things that I am necessarily fallible in what I do. But I also believe that every act of coercion on my part is evidence of a fault – a hang-up or irrationality – in myself (not a fault, or “irrationality” in the child), which is in principle correctable, and I am keen to locate such irrationalities and try to resolve them.

With that preamble, let's go through your six points. In general, what I want to say about them is that you are right that they are false, but they are not relevant to the issue of child-rearing, as you yourself stated it in an earlier posting, namely (in terms of the food metaphor), given that I will not force my child to eat or not eat given foods, *what meals should I prepare for my child?* Because they are not relevant to that issue, when you keep harping on them, I am forced to construe some relevance that you think it has, and the only relevance it has is to justify coercion *in my sense* though not perhaps in yours. It is as if (to take another analogy), in an extended discussion about human rights, one party were constantly to harp on the issue, “when people are given human rights, many *harm themselves, and make disastrous decisions* on their own behalf.” That is undeniably true, you see. Nevertheless one would suspect that such a person is not sure in his own mind, and I should fear that such a person might not scrupulously respect human rights, were he in government.

Your first point is that you reject the notion that “belief that an action is of value implies willingness to force others to perform or accept it.” It *doesn't* imply this, but I think that nevertheless you *are* willing to. I could be wrong. I shall be glad if you prove me wrong.

Secondly, you reject the notion that “failure to persuade someone to accept a proposition necessarily results in an attempt to coerce them to accept it.” It doesn't *necessarily*, but if one holds the opinion that a certain proposition is self-evident, and that any rational person would adopt it, then if one should fail to persuade him, one is bound by logic to conclude that the person isn't rational. When one has concluded that someone isn't rational and that person is making a disastrously harmful decision, one *is* likely to use coercion. If a person has “undeniably” abandoned reason *and* as a result of this is going to do one harm, then (unless one is a complete pacifist) that *is* a justification for using force. Since you have adopted a position that logically justifies force, you can't really blame other people for drawing the conclusion that you refuse to draw.

Another statement you wish to reject is: “everything that is useful is interesting.” I agree that this is true in the narrow sense, that we may do things for our future benefit which we would not do solely for their immediate effect. (But, in a wider sense, something that is useful *becomes* interesting indirectly. BTW, I have never memorised any of the items on your list – arbitrarily assigned user IDs and passwords, phone numbers, the price of petrol, UNIX commands, etc. – but I

do have these sort of things in my memory, and all I did was to look things up each time I used them, until I just remembered them. I never use rote learning methods the way you do, and nor should I wish to. Adults and children often learn vast quantities of listed information for the sheer fun of it.)

But here I come to the nub of the issue. How is the truth that “not everything that is useful is (in itself) interesting” going to help you to rear your child (to prepare his metaphorical meals)? How will you behave differently from how you *would* have behaved if you forgot that proposition? Whether or not one remembers it, one in any case always points out to the child that a thing is *useful*. One gives it one's best shot, one's most persuasive arguments. One is arguing, by the way, that as far as one can see, the future usefulness of this thing is important by the child's *present* values. The child will agree – or disagree. (In neither case does one then point out to him that the thing is *uninteresting*.) If he disagrees one will respect his wishes and wholeheartedly help him to learn what he *does* want to. So what role does this great truth play? If he is persuaded, he studies what we think best. If he is not persuaded, he does not study it. End of story.

If ultimately the choice remains the child's, it is not relevant whether or not there are any non-interesting things that are useful. All that was relevant was that you told him it was useful, and that he had the choice of whether to do it or not.

The last propositions on your list are: “everything that is worth doing is easy” and “the value of every educational field or useful technique is readily apparent to people not versed in the field.” Again, this is only relevant to education if you think that if something is not easy, children might not do it, even after your best persuasion, *and that then you will – what?*

The last three propositions on your list are really all saying the same thing. You think that some parts of education, though vital, are intrinsically unpleasant. Moreover you think that *you* know which parts those are. It is “self-evident” to you. Nevertheless you fear that your children will not see these “self-evident truths,” and will not believe you when you say you see them.

But as a matter of fact it is simply untrue that children only do things which are “easy.” On the contrary, they tend to do things which are hard: they tend to take up challenging problems.

Suppose you are sitting with your four-year-old, and you are looking up all the useful but uninteresting topics you have chosen for him in an encyclopaedia or newsgroup or wherever, and he suddenly realises what you are up to (which he soon will, if he has not already) and says “Daddy, please tell me which of these topics you think *I* would prefer to read about. *Now*.” Will you tell him? And then help him with your full effort to do so? If you will, and if you make this the entire pattern of your interaction with him, what point is there in bearing in mind that some things that are worth doing are not easy? Will you not be completely occupied in helping him to things that are worth doing – by his standards – *easy or not?*

When on occasion a child does that which seems to you to violate a self-evident truth about him (such as not brushing his or her teeth, when you think that “brushing his teeth is good for him,” to quote someone else on the list) will you then make him do it (or put pressure on him, etc.) or not? If you will, then you believe in coercion (as I define it), and if you will not make him do it, you believe in non-coercion.

I hope my examples show this: I believe in telling children what is “useful,” by their present standards but in the broadest sense. I do not believe in worrying that they may not believe me, or that they may choose wrongly. I am far too busy thinking what they will enjoy, and prefer, doing. In terms of the meal analogy, I do not of course advocate asking the child to plan every menu before he even knows the names of the dishes. But he does have an absolute no-questions-asked veto on the menu, and when he *does* make a suggestion about what he would like, I try my best to follow it. I *offer* him new dishes all the time, and he accepts or rejects them. And I offer him general advice about food, and that too he accepts or rejects as he sees fit, and I then follow his theory not mine in regard to what he eats.

I think, albeit on limited evidence (which I hope you will refute), that you are ambivalent about coercion. I stress that I refer to coercion in *my* sense of the word: you may not be ambivalent about coercion in *your* sense of the word, but you *are* ambivalent about whether to refrain utterly from making the child do things against his will, and to help him with things he does want to do. I am not saying this to make you feel guilty or anything. *All* of us have conflicts of this type, and that is why I said that non-coercive education is *difficult*.

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Submitted by a reader (not verified) on 22 June, 2006 - 18:19

If it is, it's brilliant.

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