



Unschooling and Karl Popper

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 9 September, 2005 - 15:16

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

 Taking Children Seriously

I have been asked to explain the relevance of Popperian epistemology for unschoolers. In this post I shall not

argue against the conventional inductivist view of learning as a passive process. I want to show merely that there *is* a connection between Popper's ideas and unschooling.

For the benefit of those on the list who are unfamiliar with the word, “unschoolers” was coined by John Holt and refers to home educators who advocate non-coercive education, though sometimes defining “coercion” and “education” rather narrowly. Unschoolers are rightly keen on the idea of self-directed learning and eschew externally-imposed instruction. Thus, they consider the school model of education as inimical to learning, because that whole system is based on the idea of compulsory instruction from without.

Unschoolers say that instruction from without is highly unlikely to address the real interests and concerns (or “problem situation,” as Popper calls it) of the individual learner. How could one person's (or one school's, or one government's) vision of What Children Need To Be Taught possibly bear any relation to an individual child's burning questions, problems, and interests? Is it likely that a lesson planned for several children (or millions of children, in the case of a national curriculum) will answer any questions the child happens to have at that time?

This idea of children as active, self-directing learners is implied by Popperian epistemology: the growth of knowledge proceeds through an active, creative, rational process of conjectures and refutations rather than passive reception of information. Popper does not just think that instruction from without is inefficient as a means of education, he does not believe that knowledge ever grows through passive reception of information. This does not mean that no one ever tries to force children to submit to teaching, or that children never become interested in what someone is telling them, and learn something. What it means is that, as John Holt put it, learning is a product of the activity of the learner. That is, direct transmission of information from a teacher to a learner just does not happen. Children are not buckets into which we can pour knowledge. The school system is based upon what Popper calls the bucket theory of the mind. As he says in *The Myth of the Framework*:

The inductivist or Lamarkian approach operates with the idea of instruction from without, or from the environment. But the critical or Darwinian approach only allows instruction from within – from within the structure itself.

In fact, I contend that there is no such thing as instruction from without the structure, or the passive reception of a flow of information which impresses itself on our sense organs. All observations are theory-impregnated. There is no pure, disinterested, theory-free observation.

[...]

We do not discover new facts or new effects by copying them, or by inferring them inductively from observation, or by any other method of instruction by the environment. We use, rather, the method of trial and the elimination of error. As Ernst Gombrich says, "making comes before matching": the active production of a new trial structure comes before its exposure to eliminating tests.

The fact is, when you give a few child a lesson you have planned, the result is entirely unpredictable. You have no idea what, if anything, each individual child will learn (and any ideas you may have about that are likely to be mistaken). But one thing you can be pretty sure of is that no two children will end up with the same "knowledge" at the end of the lesson. Children – human beings generally – are not passive learners. They do not learn by induction. They are active learners, and each person has his own unique problem situation. That is, at any given moment, each person has a unique set of interests, concerns, questions and problems, that he is actively addressing.

In *How Children Fail*, the unschoolers' guru, John Holt, writes about the effects of teaching on children. To put what John Holt said into more Popperian terms, the child subjected to externally-imposed instruction is much more likely to be engaged in solving the problem of *how to survive questions from the teacher with the least possible embarrassment or how to perform*, than in learning the content of the lesson. Thus the problem the child is addressing – *what the child is learning in that situation* – is nothing whatever to do with the content of the lesson. The likelihood that the teacher-imposed lesson will answer any questions in the child's mind, or in any way relate to the problem situation the child had before the start of the lesson, is negligibly small.

Popper's work provides an epistemological critique of the teacher-directed learning model, although it appears that Popper himself never made this connection. If John Holt's later work, including his revisions of *How Children Learn* and *How Children Fail*, show signs of Popperian influence, that is not surprising. John Holt was influenced by David Deutsch, and it was David Deutsch who first realised the implications of Popper's epistemology for education and child-raising.

to post comments

Comments

Yes it was very interesting!

Submitted by [student \(not verified\)](http://about-educational.blogspot.com/) on 1 March, 2008 - 12:33

Thanks for posting.

to post comments

What would Popper have said about TCS?

Submitted by [cisco training ... \(not verified\)](http://www.netwind.com) on 1 May, 2008 - 14:13

How can parents know everything they need to teach their children? Isn't there too much to learn? What would Popper have said about TCS?

to post comments

schooling

Submitted by [Deeper Voice \(not verified\)](http://www.deepervoice.net) (<http://www.deepervoice.net>) on 17 April, 2010 - 15:08

Surely, if you were going to have children unschooled you'd need to take training yourself? Even teachers don't know everything and tend to study one subject with the kids moving around teachers for different lessons throughout the day. Not to mention the kids missing out on another valuable lesson. Social interaction!

to post comments

Unschooling, not kitchen classroom.

Submitted by Willow on 18 May, 2010 - 11:28

Deeper Voice, Unschooling doesn't require the parent to know everything the child might want to learn. The parent is the facilitator who provides the means for the child to learn as they wish. Things like taking the child to the shops, having internet access, buying them a bus pass, making links in the community, paying attention to their interests, responding to their requests. The subject matter is out there.

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