

Learning: It's Not About Education

Written by Laura Grace Weldon.

When you pick up an orange you feel its texture and weight in your hand. You breathe in scent emitted by the brightly colored rind. If you're hungry, you peel and section it to savor piece by piece. A fresh orange has phytonutrients, fiber, minerals, and vitamins that promote health. And it tastes wonderful.

It's possible to purchase the separate nutritional components of an orange. You simply buy vitamin C, vitamin A, flavonoids, B-complex vitamins, fiber, potassium, and calcium in pill form. Of course replacing an orange with supplements is ridiculously expensive compared to the cost of consuming the fruit itself. And isolated compounds don't work as effectively in the body as the whole fruit. Besides, where is the sensation of biting into an orange bursting with juice? Lost. Divided into a fraction of the experience.

Imagine being told in your earliest years that pills were superior to food and should replace it as often as possible. Even if handfuls of supplements were deemed more valuable than food by every adult in your life you'd still clamor to eat what you found appetizing. If meal-substitution pills became mandatory for children once they turned five years old, you'd never relate to food (or its replacement) the same way again. The body, mind, and spirit reject what diminishes wholeness.

Yet that's an apt analogy for heavily structured education, where learning is set apart from the threads that connect it to what has meaning and purpose for the learner. Conventional education separates learning into thousands of measurable objectives. It has very little to do with a child's hunger to master a particular skill or thirst to pursue an area of interest, in fact such appetites tend to interfere with institutional requirements. It's not designed for the whole child but aimed at one hemisphere of the brain, doled out in pre-determined doses and repeatedly evaluated. The most gifted, caring teachers are stuck within systems that don't acknowledge or understand natural learning. In fact, most of us believe, however grudgingly, that schooling is necessary for learning without recognizing that damage is done.

For the very youngest children, learning is constant. Their wondrous progress from helpless newborn to sophisticated five-year-old happens without explicit teaching. They explore, challenge themselves, make mistakes, and try again with an insatiable eagerness to learn. Young children seem to recognize that knowledge is an essential shared resource, like air or water. They demand a fair share. They actively espouse the right to gain skills and understanding in a way that's useful to them at the time.

Although we have the idea that learning flows from instruction, when we interfere with natural learning children show us with stubbornness or disinterest that it has nothing to do with coercion. Children often ignore what they aren't ready to learn only to return to the same concept later, comprehending it with ease and pleasure. What they do is intrinsically tied to *why* they do it, because they know learning is purposeful. They are curious, motivated, and always pushing in the direction of mastery.

But schooling irrevocably alters the natural process of learning for every single child.

- The very structure of school makes children passive recipients of education designed by others. They cannot charge ahead fueled by curiosity, pursuing interests wherever they lead. Although interest-driven learning results in high level mastery, the top priority in school is completing assignments correctly and scoring well on tests. Despite what individual children want to learn, value is given to what can be evaluated.
- Segregated by age, children are limited to examples of behavior, reasoning, and ability from those at a similar level of maturity. They have little exposure to essential adult role models and minimal engagement in community life. They're also deprived of the opportunity to practice the sort of nurturance and self-education that happens when children interact in multi-age settings. Even collaboration is defined as cheating.
- A child's natural inclination to discover and experiment is steered instead toward meeting curricular requirements. Gradually the child's naturally exploratory approach is supplanted by less meaningful ways of gathering and retaining information.
- The mind and body are exquisitely cued to work together. Sensory input floods the brain, locking learning into memory. Movement is essential for learning. The emphasis in school, however, is almost entirely static, and almost entirely focused on left-brain analytical thinking. Many children ache for more active involvement, but their attempts to enliven the day are labeled behavior problems. The mismatch between school-like expectations and normal childhood behavior has resulted in millions of children being diagnosed with ADHD.
- Coming up with the correct answer leaves little room for trial and error. Thinking too carefully or deeply may result in the wrong answer. The right answer from a child's personal perspective may actually be the opposite of the correct answer, but to get a good mark the child cannot be true to his or her experience. The grade becomes more important than reality.
- Emphasis on the correct answer squeezes out unconventional thinking. The fear of making mistakes squelches creativity and innovation. After years of being taught to avoid making mistakes, the child has also learned to steer clear of originality.
- Readiness is pivotal for learning, particularly in reading. In school, reading is used to instruct in every other subject, so the child who doesn't read at grade level quickly falls behind. The subject matter in school, even when taught well, isn't necessarily what the child is ready to learn. The way it is presented tends to be indirect, inactive, and

irrelevant to the child. Schoolwork repeatedly emphasizes skill areas that are lacking rather than building on strengths, or goes over skills already mastered with stultifying repetition. Neither approach builds real learning

- The desire to produce meaningful work, the urge to make contributions of value, the need to be recognized for oneself, and other developmental necessities are undercut by the overriding obligation to complete assignments.
- Conventional education takes the same approach to a six-year-old and an 18-year-old: assignments, grades, tests. Self-reliance and independence doesn't easily flourish in such a closed container.
- Children must hurry to do the required work, then change subjects. The information is stuffed into their short-term memories in order to get good grades and pass tests, even though such tests tend to measure superficial thinking. In fact, higher test scores are unrelated to future accomplishments in such career advancement, positive relationships, or leadership. Students aren't learning to apply information to real life activities nor are they generating wisdom from it. The very essence of learning is ignored.
- Schoolwork clearly separates what is deemed "educational" from the rest of a child's experience. This indicates to children that learning is confined to specific areas of life. A divide appears where before there was a seamless whole. Absorption and play are on one side in opposition to work and learning on another. This sets the inherent joy and meaning in all these things adrift. The energy that formerly prompted a child to explore, ask questions, and eagerly leap ahead becomes a social liability. Often this transforms into cynicism.
- When young people are insufficiently challenged or pushed too hard, they do learn but not necessarily what they're being taught. What they learn is that the educational process is boring or makes them feel bad about themselves or doesn't acknowledge their deeper gifts. They see that what they achieve is relentlessly judged. They learn to quell enthusiasm and suppress the value-laden questions that normally bubble up as they seek to grow more wholly into themselves. Gradually, their natural moment-to-moment curiosity is distorted until they resist learning anything but what they have to learn. This is how the life force is drained from education.

We're so committed to structured, top-down instruction that we impose it on kids beyond the school day. Young people are relentlessly shuttled from the classroom to enrichment activities to organized sports and back home to play with educational toys or apps when there's very little evidence that all this effort, time, and money results in learning of any real value.

Many of us think that education has always been this way—stuffing information into young people who must regurgitate it back on demand. Based on dropout numbers alone, this approach doesn't work for at least a quarter of U.S. students. So we advocate copying

Finland or Singapore, using the newest electronics, taking away testing, increasing testing, adding uniforms or yoga or chess or prayer. We've been reforming schools for a long time without recognizing, as Einstein said, "You cannot solve a problem from the same consciousness that created it."

Structured education is actually very new to the human experience. Worse, it actually undermines the way children are primed to advance their abilities and mature into capable adults. That's because most of the time humanity has spent on Earth has been as nomadic hunter-gatherers, before the advent of agriculture. This time span comprises approximately 98% of human history. Although our culture and lifestyle have changed considerably, our minds and bodies have not. Like our earliest ancestors we are still tuned to nature's rhythms, cued to react quickly to danger, desire close interdependence with a cohesive group of people, and need in our earliest years highly responsive nurturing that gradually fosters our abilities.

Studies of isolated groups who continue to live in hunter-gatherer ways have shown us that during this era (and throughout most time periods afterward) babies are breastfed and remain in close contact with their mothers for the first few years. This results in securely attached infants who are more likely to grow up independent, conscientious, and intellectually advanced.

Their children play freely in multi-age groups without overt supervision or direction by adults. Such free play promotes self-regulation (ability to control behavior, resist impulse, and exert self-control) which is critical for maturity. Play fosters learning in realms such as language, social skills, and spatial relations. It teaches a child to adapt, innovate, handle stress, and think independently. Even attention span increases in direct correlation to play.

Playfulness can't be separated from learning. Children watch and imitate the people around them. The child's natural desire to build his or her capabilities doesn't have to be enforced. Instruction happens when the child seeks it. The learning environment is particularly rich when young people are surrounded by adults performing the tasks necessary to maintain their way of life. Children naturally learn as they playfully repeat what they see and begin to take part in these real life tasks. Mastering all the skills for self-reliance isn't easy. Hunter-gatherer children must recognize thousands of species of plants and animals as well as how to best obtain, use, and store them. They must know how to make necessary items such as nets, baskets, darts, carrying devices, clothing, and shelter. They need to learn the lore of their people and pass along wisdom through story, ritual, and art. And perhaps most importantly, they need to be able to cooperate and share in ways that have allowed humanity to thrive. In such cultures, children learn on their own timetables in ways that best use their abilities.

We don't have to live as hunter-gatherers do to restore natural learning to children's lives. Homeschoolers and unschoolers have been doing this, quite easily, for a very long time. Our children learn as they are ready and in ways that augment strong self-hood. They stay up late to stargaze or make music or design video games, knowing they can sleep late the next morning. They may fill an afternoon reading or actively contribute to the community. They have time to delve into topics of interest to them, often in much greater depth and breadth than any curriculum might demand. They explore, ask questions, volunteer, hang out with friends of all ages, take on household responsibilities, daydream, seek challenges, make mistakes and start over. They're accustomed to thinking for themselves and pursuing their own interests, so they're more likely to define success on their own terms. Because homeschooling/unschooling gives them the freedom to be who they already are, it pushes back against a world relentlessly promoting narrow definitions of success.

This kind of natural learning isn't just an antidote to the soul crushing pressure of test-happy schools. It's the way young people have learned throughout time.

Let children sleep in. Let them dream. Let them wake to their own possibilities.

Originally published at LauraGraceWeldon.com.

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