

Education and Its Discontents

(Editor's note: This article was originally written in March 2015.)

The other day I was left in charge of the school library for the day, which I loved, since I have always been a library nerd. That same day I was also left in charge of the 6th grade class for one hour and 50 minutes. Since I am not into enforcing rules, the class quickly became a bunch of raucous chaos. I was cool with that, as long as nobody was getting hurt. However, a teacher outside the library heard the noise, came in and started yelling at the kids to be quiet, and glared at me for not enforcing the rules. To which I thought to myself "I don't f***ing care." This could be the kind of thing that leads to me leaving the volunteer gig.

Let me back up a bit here. I have beliefs about education in general, and epistemology in particular, that are different from that of most people. To begin with, I disagree with the very notion of "compulsory education". To be "compulsory" means "you have to go whether you want to or not". That, in my eyes, is wrong. That makes it a prison. Period. (And in case you are wondering, I am anti-prison as well.)

Carl Rogers once said: "Learning of all kinds goes on best, lasts best, and tends to lead itself on more when it grows out of a real focus of interest in the learner." That is essentially how I view learning, and in the situations of compulsory education those who are compelled are most often interested in just learning to say and do that which is necessary to please those who are doing the compelling. The ostensible subject matter at hand is incidental.

Situations of compulsory education therefore consists of students who mainly do not want to be there who face teachers and other school authority figures who use some combination of yelling, threats and bribes presented to the students to get the students to act in ways that they desire. What is taught to the students is basically: "You have no choice in where you will be. If you do not do as I tell you, worse things will happen to you. If you follow orders, better things will happen to you." The subject here is learning to accept the basic context of being in a prison and to follow orders to escape a worse fate.

I believe that people have an innate desire to be free, and that that is slowly whittled away by compulsory education and other experiences in our authoritarian society to result in the psychological state of most adults, who have suppressed that desire to be free and have internalized the policing inside themselves. Children have not yet reached that condition, hence the role of most teachers being that of policing the children. Most classrooms that I have been in, both as a child and as an adult, I have seen the scenario play out where the teacher or other school authority figure leaves the room and as soon as that happens total

chaos breaks out. I have seen this happen **SO MANY times now**, that I basically have come to expect that to happen whenever the authority figure leaves. I see this as being expression on the part of the children of their yearning to be free.

Authority is a kind of social relationship that people act out with each-other. In it, certain people are designated the roles of giving the commands, and other people (the majority) are designated with the role of following the orders. Authority is prevalent all throughout our society, not just in educational settings of course, but when the objective is presumably one of learning the presence of the authority relationship is particularly egregious. I realized all of this when I was a student in high school. I noticed how and when the teachers would play out the authority relationship, and how the other students would respond to that with either submission or rebellion (and the authority's response with punishment or threats of punishment). And I observed the times when teachers were **not** acting out the authority relationship, when they were simply peers and fellow human beings with the students. I realized that I really enjoyed the presence of the teachers when they were not acting in an authority relationship, and I hated them when they were.

The key thing for learning, as I said earlier, is to have authentic interest and curiosity. Sometimes this does by chance exist within the school environment. For example, I remember when I was in the second grade and I was sincerely interested in learning how to read, and that year the teacher taught the students how to read, and I loved it. A similar thing happened when I was in the fifth grade and I was really interested in colonial history, and it just so happened that the teacher was covering the history of the time period. I totally soaked up that information, and I recall even talking about history stuff with the teacher during recess periods while the other children were playing. Most often, though, what is being taught does not overlap with the students' interests, which fits most of the rest of my educational experience, which I simply don't remember as a result. The norm is for students to learn what is necessary to pass the tests and to please the teachers, and then to promptly forget it all and move on. In other words, most of what is taught is forgettable.

The kind of learning environment that I support can more or less fit under the category of unschooling. That is, the learner chooses what they want to learn about and how they want to go about learning it. This could include the traditional classroom environment, if the learner chooses to pursue that, but with the way that those are usually run, what with the teachers yelling, threatening and bribing the students, I doubt that learners would choose that kind of option that often. Teachers and parents **do** have a role in the learning process, and that is as a kind of facilitator, helping the learner get access to the resources and materials that they want and need, keeping track of what they are doing and studying, making suggestions when appropriate and giving advice when wanted.

Unschooling, in the case of children's education, is usually contained within the larger

category of “homeschooling”. I did traditional homeschooling for half of eighth grade, and I can very much tell the difference between that and unschooling. In my case, my mother and step-father determined the curriculum, regardless of my interests. I recall even coming up with and suggesting to them an ambitious idea for a new curriculum design for us to use that spanned across, and illustrated the relationships between, many different subjects and disciplines. My proposal was summarily shot down, and we continued on with pursuing the original curriculum design that they previously established for me.

By contrast, unschooling is based on the active **choice** of the learner. Those who are helping the learner are there to assist that person in pursuing the interests and objectives that they have set for themselves. I unofficially practiced unschooling myself during the second half of my high school experience, after I officially dropped out of high school. During that time period I spent most of my days in libraries, pursuing whatever subject matter and materials my interest and curiosity took me to. I did not have any guides or mentors during that time period, my parents essentially had no idea that this was going on, and I was pretty much on my own. Although that was not the kind of unschooling environment that I would recommend for others, I feel as if I learned more during that time period than I did in the years prior to that. This is because my own **authentic interest** was present, because I was learning what I **wanted** to learn, and because all that I did was based on my own **free choice**.

Which brings me to the issue of “choice”. I have seen many well-meaning teachers try to establish for their students some degree of “choice”, in order to get closer to an approximation of the kind of free learning that I am talking about. Usually these kind of “choices” do not amount to much and the students see through the visage to what’s really going on. In these cases the teacher is still in control, the teacher sets the parameters, determines the acceptable choices, and if they so desire, reneges on the choices that were initially offered. This is a particular kind of teacher-controlled classroom activity, not a learner-directed unschooling situation.

In an unschooling situation, two of the best resources that I could recommend are libraries and discussion groups comprised of people who are all interested in the subject matter at hand. I have always been interested in libraries, my entire life, because I have always seen it as being a place where one has free reign to learn about whatever one wants to learn about. Discussion groups with fellow interested participants is something that I have developed an enthusiasm for only in my adulthood, and thanks to the internet it has now become a lot easier to find and organize these than what was once the case. Also, a third resource, the internet, goes without saying as being an invaluable resource for unschooling learners.

So, back to the topic of me volunteering at the school in Tonga. I am working at this school not because I believe in what the school is doing or what it is ostensibly about, but because

I wanted to have the experience of working in a remote foreign country doing something that I have never done before. Think of it as a kind of unschooling elaborate field trip excursion. In a way it is better that I am not being paid for the work that I am doing here, because then I would feel more contractually and financially beholden to the systems and methods that the teachers at the school are practicing. On the other hand, this leads me to be in a situation where my own direct labor is contributing to an institution that I do not believe in, and in my ideal world would not even exist, and I am not even being paid to support this! From what I am told, however, this school is one of the most lenient schools in the nation of Tonga because the teachers at this school do not physically hit their students. There is a whole spectrum of epistemological beliefs out there.

I like working at the library at the school because the library is a place where the students could at least **potentially** learn and discover things on their own that could take them off to new places. The issue of classroom chaos, children “getting out of control”, does not concern me, as long as everybody is physically safe. The reason for this is that most people are not used to having the experience of freedom, and often when people first experience freedom there is for many an initial period of frantic confusion where they try to figure out what to do without the presence of an authority. Instead of responding to that with a desire of immediately reinstating authority, I prefer to just give people time and let people discern on their own what they would like to do next.

Already I have been identified as somebody who is comfortable with “chaos” – disapprovingly by a teacher, and approvingly by a student, who has expressed astonishment that I have not yet yelled at any of the students. This is a precarious place for me to be in, since generally those who reject authority on principle do not do well within institutions whose job it is to instill in others the love and obedience of authority on principle. So, we will see how it goes. At the very least, I can always move on to learning other things.