

Sudbury: Autonomy in Community

Written by Bruce Smith.

If you look only at websites and social media, you might think every school, learning center, daycare, unschooler, homeschooler, and educational consultant is a staunch advocate of child-centered learning. Even the most conventional schools, it seems, pay lip service to empowering young people for the emerging challenges of the Information, Digital, Post-Industrial, or whatever Age is now upon us.

Fortunately, actual Self-Directed Education is thriving. More and more people are coming to know the power and flexibility of letting young people learn the way our species evolved: relying on their innate curiosity and drive to explore and engage meaningfully with the world. What's more, within the world of Self-Directed Education there is a variety of approaches. This makes sense, really, given that self-direction implies a diversity of individual beliefs and preferences, but it means you have to dig a little deeper to get a sense of what self-direction entails.



I've been associated with Sudbury schooling since the 1990s (it's been around since the '60s), and so I'd like to take this opportunity to share a glimpse into Self-Directed Education from a Sudbury perspective. In a nutshell, Sudbury involves self-directed learning in mixed-age, democratically run settings. No other approach I've seen is more agenda-free in letting young people decide how to spend their time, and I can't imagine offering them more influence on the workings of their learning environment. In both respects, Sudbury places a faith in people's capacity not colored by their age.

Honoring all interests means not valuing some pursuits over others, neither shunning some as frivolous or worse (say, screen time), nor upholding others as superior (say, progressive causes). With Sudbury, trusting young people to find their own way—to discern and construct their own values, meaning, and purposes—is qualified only by the value of coexistence in a community that respects everyone’s autonomy.

This intersection of the personal and the social is critically important. I think many self-directed learners face the misperception that freedom equals license, that letting people choose for themselves means neglecting important truths, skills, or values.

In truth, the reality of interconnectedness comes forth naturally and abundantly in settings that are, essentially, small societies where everyone’s well-being is clearly bound up with everyone else’s.

The value of Sudbury stems from this interplay of autonomy and community. A common rule at Sudbury schools holds everyone responsible for the general welfare, through actions that contribute to preserving an atmosphere of freedom, respect, fairness, trust, and order. (So much for unbridled individualism.) We know people as young as four or five are capable of making significant decisions and living with the consequences—we know, because we’ve seen it countless times over the past five decades.

This means that we don’t limit participation in school management (including making and enforcing rules, spending the school’s money, and hiring) out of a belief that young people can’t or won’t take part in it, or that the adults will just run things anyway (so why maintain the appearance of empowerment?). Rather, Sudbury offers them full membership in their own community, a place where they can deeply experiment and practice with what it means to be who they are as part of something larger than themselves, in ways not always feasible or appropriate elsewhere.

Self-directed learning in self-governed schools offering both a family feel and full autonomy—that might be another another way to express the Sudbury essence. I wouldn’t presume to tell anyone what approach is best for them, but after all I’ve seen, I do feel confident in stating that Sudbury offers a uniquely beneficial approach to Self-Directed Education.

Originally published at Self-Directed.org