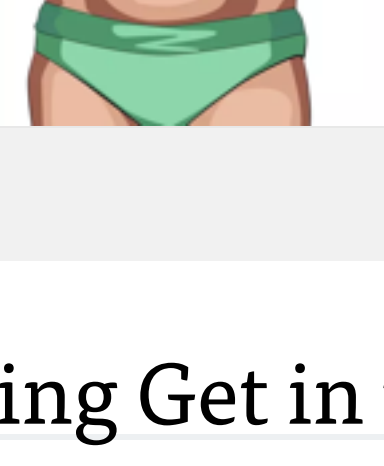




Cardiologists: How To Quickly Lose a Hanging Belly (Its Genius!)

Wellness Tip

Open

‘Never Let Schooling Get in the Way of Your Education’

by Henry Jenkins July 14, 2006

Mark Glaser is on vacation this week, and will resume blogging next Monday. We're happy to have Henry Jenkins as guest blogger in his place. Jenkins is the Director of the MIT Comparative Media Studies Program and the Peter de Florez Professor of Humanities. He is the author and/or editor of twelve books on various aspects of media and popular culture, including *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, which is coming out next month from New York University Press. Plus he recently launched his own blog, "*Confessions of an Aca/Fan*":

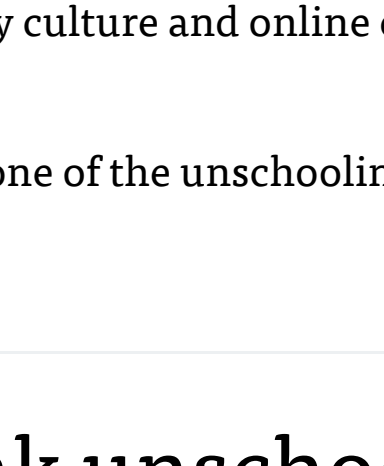
Some years ago, my wife, my son, and I came to a parting of the ways with the Sommersville Public School System. We felt the schooling process was failing our son. The science teacher conducted no experiments but simply had students write answers to study questions while he worked crossword puzzles in front of the class. The literature instructor had managed to walk them paragraph by paragraph through a single, not particularly challenging novel for the entire school year. And the history class had not progressed much past the American Revolution after 9 months.

The social environment of the school was hostile. When the other kids were taunting my son by throwing basketballs at him during gym, we suggested he spend a period sitting next to the teacher. When my son's abusers accidentally hit her with a ball, she asked him to move rather than dealing with the bullies. The school was neither going to nurture his curiosity nor protect his dignity.

My wife and I had decided we wanted to take action but weren't sure how our son would feel about it. One day he asked us if he could stop going to that school and we shocked everyone by saying yes. He had mixed feelings from the start but we plowed forward anyway.

We had been reluctant to add to the ranks of Cambridge faculty members who were not supporting the public schools. We had both been a product of public education ourselves. But at the end of the day, the needs of the child came first. We were reminded of what my father used to say, "never let schooling get in the way of your education."

So, we took him out of school and taught him ourselves for a year. He was able to explore topics which mattered to him and we were able to teach him things that we knew. We made use of the resources of the local community, going on frequent fieldtrips. We worked on writing and media production projects together. It was a rocky ride — when you are 13, it's not always a good idea for your parents to be the only authority figures in your life. The biggest problem he faced, though, was social isolation. We had taken him out of a harsh school environment but we had done nothing to insure that he had regular interactions with friends his own age.



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At the end of the year, he was happy to move into a very good private school. When he did, he was ready for the more advanced level of work and he had mastered core writing skills that serve him well down to the present day. He recently graduated from the University of Arizona-Tucson with a degree that straddled media studies and creative writing.

All of this came back in a rush when I began working recently with one of my MIT Comparative Media Studies graduate students, *Vanessa Bertozzi*, on a project dealing with media practices within the "unschooling community." More than anything, her project brought home to me how much the introduction of digital and mobile technologies had expanded opportunities for informal learning.

Media Use in the Unschooling Community

For one thing, what might have seemed an exotic choice a little over a decade ago is becoming more common place. As of 2003, there were 1.1 million home schoolers in the United States, accounting for roughly 2 percent of school aged children. People are embracing home schooling for a range of different reasons: some like my wife and I felt the schools were failing to meet their own standards of instruction; some are fundamentalists who want to opt out of secular society and give stronger moral instruction through the home or through a faith-based community. Unschoolers have a philosophical opposition to institutionalized instruction. Drawing inspiration from the works of John Holt, Ivan Illich and others, Unschoolers see formal schooling as the moral opposite of education: governed by an internally imposed logic rather than shaped by an individual's curiosity and passion; focused around insuring obedience to rules and authority rather than on principles of individual freedom and personal expression; cut off from the normal processes of everyday life and estranged from the activities of other members of the family and of the community.

Historically, the unschooling community was highly anti-technological, seeing computers as tools of the bureaucracy. But, as *Bertozzi's research* suggests, these attitudes have shifted as the unschooling community has embraced new forms of participatory culture and online community.

Here's how one of the unschooling mothers described the role that media played in the learning culture she was creating within her home:

I think unschoolers look at media (and the world) differently than schoolers. Schoolers ask the question,

“How can I get this information into my child?” and see new media as a way of directing children's attention onto what the educators want them to learn. Unschoolers ask the question, ‘What are you interested in doing now?’ and any learning happens as a side effect of exploring. New media just gives kids greater and easier access to what interests them.

At one time, the two core disadvantages of homeschooling were the absence of contact with a larger community of young people and a lack of access to the rich resources of the school library. Digital culture has turned both situations on their heads. Bertozzi's thesis describes the ways that unschoolers use social networking software such as Friendster and MySpace to expand the social and intellectual contacts available to their children; she documents ways that, say, homeschoolers are “smart mobbing” field trips, bringing kids from across the city together at an art gallery, science museum, or historic site at a specific moment of time; they share their work with others via Flickr, getting feedback from the unschooling community at large. Of course, unschoolers also interact face to face with friends, neighbors, and others who actively contribute to the learning process.

The web also dramatically expands the range of resources available to any given family. Bertozzi uses the metaphor of a curiosity cabinet to describe the ways that digital media opens up a space for kids to explore the things that really matter to them, pursuing their own tasks on their own time and towards their own ends. Unschoolers move beyond seeking information on the web towards actively networking and pooling knowledge with others in their community and beyond.

Fans, Gamers, and Poets

Of course, many of these unschooling principles also apply to other digital communities, where people gather to share information or discuss issues which are important to them. University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education Professor James Paul Gee calls such informal learning cultures “affinity spaces.” Affinity spaces offer powerful opportunities for learning. Gee argues, because they are sustained by common endeavors which bridge across differences in age, class, race, gender, and educational level, because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests, because they depend on peer to peer teaching with each participant constantly motivated to acquire new knowledge or refine their existing skills, and because they allow each participant to feel like an expert while tapping the expertise of others.

In my *forthcoming book*, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, I describe the fan fiction community which has grown up around Harry Potter as an example of this kind of affinity space in action: there, young people and adults, alike, improve their writing skills by building off of the scaffolding of J.K. Rowling's original novels; they participate in a “beta-reading” process which amounts to intensive and ongoing peer-to-peer review and revision of their stories; they receive extensive feedback as well from readers who visit the fan fiction site; and the fact that they are writing to be read by a larger public — rather than just a teacher in a classroom — motivates them to do their best work and to keep on producing new stories.

One of James Gee's students, Rebecca Black, has done similar work looking at fan fiction writers interested in Japanese anime. She has found such practices to motivate ESL students to spend more time working on their English. Students from Japan are in particular eagerly sought out within this group as a source of information; others are willing to put up with faulty syntax if it gets them access to relevant information; and they have a motivation to rehearse and improve their skills as they become more a part of this community.

Gee's UW-Madison colleagues Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuhler have applied his affinity space concept to look at the kinds of communities that spring up to support the playing of historical simulation and strategy games, such as the Civilization series. They reported in *an article* for Library Journal:

In 2003, a group of Civilization fans started Apolyton University, an online “university” dedicated to improving Civ3 players’ skills. After a few years of playing Civ3, players wanted to explore new game play elements and different modes of play with peers. They created “courses,” such as “Give Peace a Chance,” which helps players learn to win through nonviolent means. In each course, players download a saved game file, which functions as the primary text for the course. As they play through the game, they take notes on all major events, discoveries, and decisions. Every 40 turns, they take a screen shot of their game and upload it along with their notes for discussion. Participants then examine one another's games and reflect on major decisions and strategies. There are about 25 courses, each of which generates dozens of pages of discussion.... Participants don’t care about identity, age, race, gender, class, or nationality. Nor is value given to credentials, degrees, or affiliations. Make a good argument for a course, and the community will decide if it's worth posting. No one “teaches” the course, although those with expertise are recognized and greatly valued—true in most gamer communities. There are no reserves, no checkout policies, no limits on what can be read.

Much of what the participants learn has to do with the mechanics of the specific game but Squire and Steinkuhler argue they are also talking about and mastering core concepts from history from monarchy to monotheism and they are learning how to work together and pool knowledge towards a common cause, skills which are going to be increasingly valued in a networked society.

Such activities are not restricted to the realm of popular culture but extend into the ways people share and talk about literary texts on line as well. Another of my MIT graduate students, Amulya Gopalakrishnan , is completing a thesis project focused on a web-based community known as *The Wondering Minstrels*. The group was started by several South Asians as a means of sharing and discussing poetry that mattered to them. It has since expanded into a global network of poetry lovers, linked, in part, by the colonial history of the British education system that resulted in many of the same poems being taught as a basic part of the curriculum across many different parts of the former Empire. As the group's FAQ explains:

Along with the poems we send personal commentaries, critical analyses, poet biographies, historical asides, trivia, links – basically, anything that catches our fancy.... We’ve long felt that the average person didn’t read (or re-read, for that matter) nearly enough poetry. Minstrels is just our way of trying to rectify the situation. Our goal is simple: if we can brighten up people’s days, make them think a little, make them feel a little, perhaps encourage them to buy a book of poetry... Another reason we keep up the show is to challenge the widely held belief that modern poetry – indeed, ‘serious’ poetry of any sort – is ‘hard’, that it requires special skills and training to appreciate. This is simply not true, and it’s our mission to demonstrate the fact.

As the participants share these poems, they end up involved in elaborate discussions about their history, their meanings, their formal structures, and the feelings and memories they inspire in the readers. In this way, poetry remains a vital, active part of the lives of the group participants, much the ways that Bertozzi's unschoolers are blurring the line between learning and family life. And it sure beats getting pelted by basketballs on the school playground.

The Harry Potter and anime fan fiction writers, the Civilization players, and the Wondering Minstrels would be surprised to be discussed as “unschoolers.” As far as they are concerned, they aren't participating in an educational activity at all. They are simply having fun and exploring topics that matter to them. But that's precisely the point. As we talk about informal learning or “unschooling,” there are no rigid boundaries between school and the rest of what we do with our lives. Learning is driven by passion; we follow our interests where they lead; we engage with others who share those intellectual and recreational pursuits; and in the end, we master complex content. For all of these groups, the web is proving to be a most hospitable environment — a new version of Bertozzi's “curiosity cabinet” full of rich resources and materials but also a social network that links us with others who are following a similar path. As my father told me years ago, “never let schooling get in the way of your education.”

Tagged:
education
guests

8 responses to “‘Never Let Schooling Get in the Way of Your Education””

1.

Chris says:

July 14, 2006 at 6:05 am

We're unschoolers with an 8 yo girl and 15 yo boy. It is so refreshing to see that someone in the media GETS unschooling! The earth is our classroom and what we can learn is limitless. The "curiosity cabinet" of an internet has been a boon to unschooling and Bertozzi's research hits the nail on the head!

2.

Karen Braun (Spunk) says:

July 14, 2006 at 7:22 am

Excellent write up on unschooling. I am a homeschooling mom of six. I don't "unschool" by some definitions, but our children's education is directed by their interests coupled with what we believe they need to learn. We use the library and digital aides quite a bit in our home for the older children. We would still homeschool without them, but they do make our life so much easier and a lot more interesting.

3.

Jessica says:

July 15, 2006 at 7:09 pm

Second on Chris' comment. This is one of the best articles I have read on unschooling written by someone who hadn't chosen to "live it". We are unschooling with our 4 children ages 2-12 and couldn't be happier. After 13 yrs of my own public education and another 6 yrs of "teacher" school it has been a long deschooling road, but I am glad I made the journey.

4.

phil shapiro says:

July 16, 2006 at 9:17 am

quite coincidentally i was working on the illustrated version of a children's story with an unschooling theme when i decided to take a break and visit this web site. so nice to see others thinking along the same lines. i've posted my story at <http://www.writersforliteracy.org/sammy.htm> the original text version of the story can be found at <http://www.his.com/ps Shapiro/stories/menu.html> thanks, henry, for opening up the door to this topic here on this blog.

5.

stephy says:

July 16, 2006 at 3:53 pm

Hey, you have a great blog here! I'm definitely going to bookmark you! I have a [Best USA Beaches](#) site. It pretty much covers The Best USA Beaches. Come and check it out if it gets time :)

6.

Kay says:

July 25, 2006 at 1:41 am

Thank you so much for sharing your ideas on unschooling. I'm a member of two of those groups you mentioned, having unschooled our 16yo son all his life, and having been involved in the fan fiction communities on Live Journal for the last three years. I recognized the process of 'learning without schooling' immediately when I began to progress as a writer, seeking out editing and creative writing improve. Using my talented peers in that context was far more satisfying than applying to, paying for, and sitting through some wretched writing class somewhere led by who knows what kind of author directing me with textbook exercises. Instead, I was lucky enough to pick a topic that motivated me, get input from people whose work I admired, and send the finished product out for review by those who appreciated the content, thus fulfilling someone else's need or desire at the same time. I know I'm no Tolstoy. But I also know I *am* a writer, and I'm proud of it. Something that 'school' didn't teach me. Thank you, and I can't wait for your book!

7.

Eric Langgager says:

September 3, 2006 at 7:05 am

It wasn't your father who said, "Never Let Schooling Get in the Way of Your Education." It was Mark Twain.

8.

hospitality management associate degree says:

July 31, 2010 at 12:19 am

Amazing one, i appreciate this work....

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