

Authentic Learning

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Abstract

In my paper I use my own children as examples of how this way of learning might look like. They are people learning from out of their own curiosity- evolving new interests and ideas as they go along, rather than having learning imposed on them. The paper also features Radio Free School, a weekly radio program produced by my family which is reflective of what I like to call authentic learning.

Authentic Learning

There's a light rain falling. I am in it, wearing my yellow raincoat, hurrying home. I want to catch the radio show my family and I produce. So I take a short cut through the school yard.

I pass classrooms of children all still sitting, amazingly in this day, and age in rows at desks. At the front, facing the blackboard-- still the symbol of knowledge acquisition- stands the teacher.

I walk by another window; a few kids gazing out of the window are momentarily distracted by my passing. They look over, some wave. I wave back and wonder at their resemblance to birds imprisoned in a cage.

Over in the soccer field, robins are digging up worms in the rain. They love it--poking about, messing around in the slippery grass, pulling out worms from the warming earth. And this is as it should be.

I reach home, my mission-- getting the pre-recorded show to the station --accomplished. "Where are the children now?" I ask Randy my husband who is working at his desk.

“Outside,” he mutters still immersed in writing his article. I go out to greet them.

Kids who unschool and kids who go to school have experiences of learning that are very, very different- apples and oranges really. They are both fruit it is true, but they taste completely different because they are not the same.

I am not afraid to say which learner’s experience, in my opinion, is the truer, more meaningful one. Who actually owns the learning? I invite you to read the next part of this essay and be your own judge.

There they are: Madeleine is dressed in black robes. She is carrying a fake snake. Bronwyn is racing away in a panic from her fast approaching figure--running and looking back fearfully. Evelynna is holding the video camera-the Director. She is barking out directions. A film is being shot. “Can you help mummy? We want you to hold the flashlight to the camera.”

Madeleine’s robes are muddy at the hem as they drag on the ground. Evelynna is being careful not to get the camera lens wet. They, like the robins I saw are unhindered by the rain, are playing creating and exploring. And that too, is as it should be.

I think about what the three were doing when I left earlier this morning. Together they were designing a map of the very school I walked through-for a treasure hunt. Our family egg hunt is held there every year.

Besides being a good site for this, we also enjoy playing soccer, hide and seek behind the trees, riding scooters and bikes (they learned to ride here) playing in the sand box, picking berries in the summer- all this when the ‘school kids’ are out.

It’s where my kids learned to play basketball and continue to play there with their dad. It ought to be a naturalized park-- there’s even a stream running along side the trees but it, like the children at school, is trapped behind a tall metal fence.

Anyway, it’s noon and it’s time for Radio Free School, so I go in. The kids stay out. They’ve heard it already. They were there when we recorded it, at the eco house tour. They were part of it,

participating in the discussion (more about this later).

When the girls come back in, they ask to view their work on the TV screen. Randy sets it up for them. Now they can critique their own work. “You look too happy,” “I have to go a bit faster” “Maybe we can do that part again?”

Later, as the day progresses, the two older girls pick up books to read. Evelynna, who is mad about black holes, is browsing through the *Discovery Magazine* from the library. Madeleine has a *Nancy Drew* novel. Bronwyn is playing the piano. It’s still early afternoon and already a wealth of authentic learning has taken place.

Why do I say ‘authentic?’ Because it comes from the children’s interests and not from a curriculum that I or the government or whom ever decides they ought to use. It comes from them; the learners.

Rather than compartmentalizing learning into fragmented bits, authentic learning is a continuum. From their obvious interest in maps one of the girls has suggested a show on maps. Next Friday, together with some friends, we’ll be going to the local university to the Maps department.

Here, while exploring the collection, the kids will find out more about how to read maps, how maps are made, and how they change over time. Authentic learning is by doing. Unlike passively receiving like I saw on my way home, authentic learning has the imprint of the learner all over it. That’s why authentic learning is not neat, but instead, untidy.

We adults know how to throw ourselves whole heartedly into something we are determined to understand regardless of the difficulty we encounter because we’ve decided we want to, or because we know that in the long run we will achieve a goal we’ve set ourselves. Why should it be different for children?

We are born to learn, so why must we adults interfere continuously with what comes naturally? Weil (1977) said, “Teaching should have no aim but to prepare by training the attention....all the other advantages of instruction are without interest” (p. 173).

How do we ‘prepare by training the attention?’ Perhaps the answer lies in allowing children time to delve into an interest as deeply and as long as they wish to. That’s concentration. What children need is an environment that nurtures learning, that allows for learning to happen.

As Holt (1967) put it, all we need to do is “bring as much of the world as we can into [their lives]; give children as much help and guidance as they need and ask for; listen respectfully when they feel like talking; and then get out of the way. We can trust them to do the rest”(p.189).

I think we can all admit that it’s easier to learn something and remember it when it is of genuine importance to us-- otherwise we either forget it or we don’t really learn it well in the first place.

I was in a school some time ago for Madeleine’s group violin lesson (although not a school student, she’d take it through the school board). The lesson being over, I suggested that we ask her teacher what ‘harmonics’ means. Her response; “You ask her. It’s *your* question. I don’t want to know.”

Well!! But that makes sense doesn’t it? My daughter is able to discern what it is that matters to her. It’s a skill many adults don’t have.

In that same school, (I’d spend quite a bit of time waiting for Madeleine’s lessons to end so I’d hear first hand the condescending way kids are regularly spoken to) it really hit me; the craziness of institutionalized learning; “Use you talking voices; use your listening ears.” No getting excited about anything.

In the background I heard the teacher asking inane questions like, “Can you divide 77 by 2? No, you can’t because there is a remainder!!!!”

And I thought about an article I’d read in a magazine featuring Brain Greene (2005), Columbia University physics professor and contributor to string theory, (also author of the elegant universe Pulitzer prize 1999).

He said,

I just think that when it comes to abstract ideas, you need many roads into them. From the scientific point of view, if you stick with one road, I think you really compromise your ability to

make breakthroughs. I think that's really what breakthroughs are about. Everybody is looking at a problem one way, and you come at it from the back. That different way of getting there somehow reveals that the other approach didn't (p. 52).

Be the judge. Who is gaining in self-directed ability, in responsibility in navigating the world, in exploration and discovery? And who, like birds whose wings have been clipped, is being damaged? Which experience is more respectful of the learner?

Kids Do Radio.

Earlier I mentioned that I would like to say more about what my children have learned from participating in the adult world by helping in the making of radio shows for Radio Free School. It's Monday morning. Evelynna has her headphones on; the telephone is at her mouth between her shoulder and chin. She holds a pen and a pad of paper is in her lap. She gives me the thumbs up! My 10 year old daughter is about to interview one of her favorite authors-- Gordon Korman. She is thrilled. She has done the research, prepared all her questions; she wants to know who his mentors have been, if he will continue to write the cool adventure stories he has been writing most recently, when he started writing. "Hi there! It's Evelynna with Radio Free School," she says, composing herself.

"Hello everybody. It's Gordon Korman." The interview has begun.

Five years ago, we were looking for ways in which as a learning family we could explore topics together. My husband Randy who has been involved in community radio before had the idea of producing a radio show featuring the things we wanted to learn more about. (Kids' interests being the focus).

We approached the local campus community radio station and put in an application.

It turned out that they were looking for more spoken world content. They offered us a weekly time slot, Wednesdays at noon. The kids not going to school, we called the show Radio free School.

Equipped with a video camera which we used as an audio recorder, we started going out into the community and carrying out our interviews. What we met was a generous and well skilled community willing to spare some time to share their knowledge and expertise with a bunch of curious, eager beavers.

Today, we are sitting around the kitchen table eating breakfast and preparing for our end of year show--selecting excerpts from past favorites.

“Remember the show we did on caving and we got to go underground and wear head lamps? That was one of my favourites,” says Evelynna.

“I like the one we did on taking care of animals. The visit to the vet was the best, ” remarks my youngest Bronwyn, who loves cats the most and wants to become a vet when she grows up.

“The one on natural horsemanship was the best,” says Madeleine, who is horse crazy.

“Learning to train horses in a way that doesn’t break their spirits. That’s what I liked.”

Looking back on what we’ve developed together as a family with the support of people in our ‘own back yard’ is rewarding. We’ve investigated everything from ballet, archeology, archery, parallel universes and scuba diving, to black holes and string theory, maps, magic, architecture and much, much more!

It amazes me how bountiful the opportunities really are to ‘learn from life’. Illich (1970) coined the phrase ‘education under the assumption of scarcity.’ The general view in society is that getting an education is not easily acquired and needs specific conditions and places in which to gain this ‘expensive treatment.’ As he said back then, it’s a myth. “Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting.” (p.56)

With access to community, and being immersed in it, learning and education happens even

incidentally.

“Do you remember when you were very little and you thought we would run out of ideas for the show?” I remind my middle daughter. “Oh yeah. I was so silly then. I thought ideas were limited.”

“Let’s do one on bubble gum!”

“Let’s do a show on fish.”

“Yeah, how about one on bogs?” (We’ve been reading up on bog mummies and recently heard of a bog close by our home.)

One idea leads to another and another. Learning is natural as one interest leads to another and another, linking them like beads on a necklace of one’s own making and design.

As we sit together evolving ideas, I notice how much more astute the girls’ questions and their insights have become, how the topics themselves take shape; sprouting and morphing into new interests, deepening others. Radio has helped the children gain in self-confidence and responsibility. Everyone is involved so that every one is concerned- “do we have a show for next week?” “Have you edited it yet?”

Admittedly, there are complaints;

“We have to go do an interview that one of us has suggested but we’re not all into it,” one daughter grumbles. Or, “the radio show takes up so much of our time!” referring to the times when, for most of the day, I’m facing the computer with my back turned to the family.

But for the most part, “It’s unifying,” concedes Madeleine who never forgets to tune in when the show is on.

Many times, we are able to invite other families along to participate-- last week we crowded into the tiny office of a molecular evolutionary geneticist to get the scoop on poop.

“We are holding 2 million year old poop from a hominid’s cave in present day China and it doesn’t smell” said my youngest. “Because it’s a fossil.”

Both kids and parents were awed by the fossils, and the mini lecture he gave, learning and contributing to the dialogue which covered climate change to cloning a woolly mammoth and the ethics around that.

“I don’t believe its right to bring back creatures that have already passed,” said one child. The scientist asked, “Why? I want to know your thoughts on that.”

The discussion that ensued was intense and lively, with everybody in the cramped room participating eagerly.

To me, learning in this way is truly authentic because everyone in that room *wanted* to be involved. Hands on, getting to see curious and interesting artifacts, not to mention playing with the model hominoid and toy cave bears, saber tooth tigers, and mammoths this eminent scientist had strewn around his office. (And he assured us that he plays with them too!).

Shows that the kids propose are often interspersed with shows featuring advocates of child-led, life learning.

Based on the premise that people learn what they truly are interested in, this kind of learning, sometimes called unschooling, or by it’s other names; ‘delight driven learning, ‘natural learning,’ ‘experienced-based learning’ and ‘independent learning,’ is freedom in learning. As George Bernard Shaw once said, “*What we want to see is the child in pursuit of knowledge, not knowledge in pursuit of the child.*”

Rather than acting as the teacher, the parent’s role is more like a facilitator-- exposing the child to what’s out there. The child is encouraged to follow her own nose and her own path. Knowledge is all around for the taking. Our job as parents is to ensure that when the child wants it, he knows how to get it.

Advocates talk about the advantages this type of learning provides for the entire family. It’s not just a

philosophical bent. It's a lifestyle. We also interview parents who are deep in the thick of it--the challenges, the doubts, the joys they share with their kids. We talk to kids who have been there and are now all grown up.

Unschooling is a sort of letting go and fundamentally a life long voyage of learning--to trust that learning is a natural phenomenon of living, around us all the time. Kids learn the same way as adults-when they are motivated to.

What do the kids like about radio? "It's fun because we get to be reporters," says Madeleine.

"It's cool to hear ourselves on the radio and it's fun to do live radio shows. Then we get to go into the studio," enthuses Evelynna.

Bronwyn says she wants to "pass the show onto my children when I'm a grown up."

Pass the torch on.

The idea is to involve the kids further as they get older; include more voices and opinions of other children, and gradually let them take over the entire project. Power to the children!

Already, the children help with the recording and editing too. As the shows are pre-recorded they are able to sit at the computer and, with adult supervision, fine tune the piece. They help choose and sometimes even compose music for the shows.

The girls have added a segment called the Crazy Show with introduction song "ain't it great to be crazy," sung by Raffi. It's a sort of nonsense, fun element of the show with jokes and riddles and general silliness.

We all agree we'd like to keep doing more book and movie reviews and invite kids to create and perform their own radio dramas too.

In the media there is still an immense lack of children's and youths' contribution to the discourse in all matters of living and learning that desperately needs to be met if we are serious about taking *them* seriously. Radio is one fantastic tool kids can use to explore their own voices and the world around them.

In my own experience radio has given the children tremendous opportunity to actually see what's out there-- the different kinds of jobs and work that people are engaged in, what people are concerned about, as well as a chance for meeting potential mentors in the flesh. The opportunity to see others in roles one might have only dreamed about.

To me, doing radio helps broaden all of our minds, so to speak . We continue to be grateful for this learning adventure tool and for the experiences of meeting inspiring people. We have the satisfaction of sharing what we have learned with others through radio. Other radio stations have picked up the program and to our delight people tell us that they in turn have learned much from listening to the shows.

In truth, there have been times when the work seems not worth the effort- it's 11pm and the show has not yet been put together, and it's supposed to be on air tomorrow! But when I get teasing the girls and ask them "shall we quit?" the answer continues to be a resounding "no way!"

Reference

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