

## **How Unschooling and Ungrading Has Helped Me In Law school**

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### **Abstract**

I graduated high school and moved across the world from Toronto to London when I was eighteen to begin a three-year LLB program. I am now in my second year and have spent time reflecting on the way I grew up. I was unschooled for kindergarten and did not attend school until I was in grade one. Unschooling is a learner centre democratic approach where the learner is empowered and entrusted to make their own decisions. When I was unschooled, I was able to do what I wanted and how I wanted every day. One day I woke up and wanted to write a story and the next I wanted to learn how to do a cartwheel. The only person I had critiquing my work was myself, and that was enough to motivate me to keep learning. When I started public school, it was a foreign concept to me that I would be told what to do, how to do it, and that I was going to be assessed on how well I did it. Eventually it became difficult to be proud of myself or satisfied with my work until I got the validation from a high grade and assignments became stressful rather than enjoyable. Furthermore, I felt like it created a competitive environment between classmates and created a toxic space for young children to grow up in. Ultimately, my independence and self-confidence were adversely affected. The goal of this autobiographical narrative research paper is to share my school experience from primary school to law school, and to share how I continue to learn things without grading, which is something that has stuck with me given my unschooling experience.

*Keywords:* Unschooling, Law School,

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### **Literature Review**

In my life, learning without grading is a significant part of unschooling. Throughout this research paper, therefore, I am going to focus, in large part, on ungrading. Grading may impact students' mind, body, spirit, and emotions. All four of these aspects are interconnected, meaning an issue with one can affect the others. While in a structured school environment I often feel wounded. For example, my overall health and well-being declined, particularly from the stress associated with formal grading. Moreover, I find that when my work is graded it distracts me from enjoying what I am learning by adding unnecessary pressure. Along the same lines, Peter Elbow (1997) said, “grading tends to undermine the climate for teaching and learning. Once we start grading their work, students are tempted to study or work for the grade rather than for learning” (p.127).

Researchers such as Blum (2020) have found that “when comments on papers are accompanied by grades, students disregard our comments—often not even reading them and certainly not using them to improve or learn more deeply” (p.3). This demonstrates how some students attribute so much value to the grade that they lose focus of the overarching goal, which is to learn. Furthermore, a study by Butler (1988) titled “Enhancing and Undermining Intrinsic Motivation,” Butler in part concludes that students who received only comments consistently performed better than students who received only grades, and students who received grades and comments. I tend to hyperfocus on the grade and lose sight of the actual learning. When I receive only comments, however, I tend to focus more on how to improve my work and learn better.

### **Methodology**

For this research, I decided to use autobiographical narrative as my methodology. One advantage of narrative research is that it allows researchers to take what they have learned through life experiences and share it with the world. I will be sharing parts of my life to better understand unschooling and how learning can happen without grading. To reduce the effects of memory issues, I spoke with my family and read my old journal entries. Narrative is the most adequate method for this paper since my goal is to share how I have used resources and learned naturally without being graded. I have supplemented my schooling by learning on my own using what I have gained from unschooling. As well, I learned a lot of content without grading throughout my schooling career, including law school, thus far. I find that using unschooling and ungrading really helps me learn in a loving way. When learning this way, I love the content and myself better. In addition, I find that when I learn without grading, the learning feels gentler, authentic, and I feel more at peace. Perhaps sharing my story will resonate with other law students and learners and they will benefit from my story. I find that using narrative as a methodology humanizes research, since it helps researchers connect their own experiences with the findings. Although these are just my experiences, I offer contextually relevant theories that deepen the link between research and real-life experiences. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write, “narrative inquiry, as a form of autobiographical research, is grounded in the idea that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives” (p. 2). Narrative research aims to explore and conceptualize human experience as it is represented in textual form. For these reasons, autobiographical narrative research was the ideal choice to fulfill my research objectives.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Holistic education is an educational philosophy that seeks to educate the whole person—intellectually, physically, socially, and emotionally. This approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of several aspects of a student’s development and each feature can influence their learning. As Korthagen explains, “through awareness of our bodily experiences we can discover what is really important to us” (Miller & Nigh, 2017, p.vii). One aspect of holistic learning prioritizes real-world experiences that engage students in meaningful ways while encouraging students to think critically and demonstrate their uniqueness and creativity.

Overall, holistic education can help prepare individuals for a successful academic career, but also for a fulfilling and satisfying life. By choosing this framework, I can give my unschooling, mainstream schooling, and law school experience a more holistic interconnected and relational understanding. Although I spent much of my time in mainstream schooling, I grew up in a holistic and democratic household and spent a lot of my time living my life within the unschooling worldview. I believe unschooling has positively affected all aspects of my life.

## **Findings**

### ***Mind***

One premise of holistic thinking is that everything is interconnected. So, for example, this means that if you are mentally stressed it can influence your body, spirit, and emotions as well. The mental stress can manifest in your body by feel nauseous, nose bleeds, or any number of bodily symptoms. I find that mental health and physical health are closely linked, and a healthy mind can contribute to a healthy lifestyle. I also find that a healthy mind also enhances problem-solving and decision-making skills and can contribute to higher productivity and performance. When I feel at peace mentally, I have more energy to devote to my body, spirit, and emotions. They are all interconnected and work together. For example, having a healthy mind is extremely

important to help manage emotions which leads to greater resilience against stress and anxiety. Also, I agree with Forgas (2001) when he argues that a healthy mind is crucial in enabling effective communication and helping people connect with others meaningful. I am best able to connect with others when I feel healthy mentally.

When my mind suffers from the stress of formal schooling my body, spirit, and emotions also follow. Stress can affect cognitive function, affect memory, impair concentration, for example. The harm formal schooling can do has been documented in many previous research studies. For example, Gray (2020, April 1) shares that school-aged teenagers are the most stressed-out people in America and 83% of them cited school as a major source of their stress, if not the major source.

Being a perfectionist causes me to have obsessive tendencies. This is simultaneously blessing and a curse, especially when it comes to schoolwork. From a negative perspective, my obsessive tendencies cause me to hyper-focus on studying and completing assignments to the detriment of other things in my life. School work becomes all I can think about. Subsequently. I get headaches and my brain gets foggy which causes me to have a hard time doing everyday activities such as driving and sleeping. Constantly seeking academic validation makes it hard to rest and give my mind a break since I overthink and always feel like I can do better.

Before I started public school I did not feel as much pressure since my only critic was myself. Being in school and having a strict set of academic criteria altered the way I think and consequently affected my overall health. When I learn things on my own without the structured framework of schooling, these negative feelings do not manifest themselves. When I am learning because I am internally motivated to learn one thing or another, I am in a state of flow. In Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) words, flow is “a state in which people are so involved in an activity

that nothing else seems to matter; the experience is so enjoyable that people will continue to do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it” (p.4).

Hence, when I am unschooling and ungrading my mind and therefore the rest of me feels at peace. As a law student, therefore, I try and find my state of flow, be mindful and in the moment, and focus as much as possible on the learning rather than the grading. I try and imagine myself unschooling, rather than focus on the mental pressures of schooling.

### ***Body***

I find that having a healthy body is crucial for overall quality of my life. It supports my physical capabilities and allows me to function everyday with ease. Being physically healthy motivates me by helping me feel more energetic. I believe that good physical health along with good nutrition and adequate sleep reduced or better prepares me to deal with the risk of chronic diseases, I also believe that it helps my body fight off infections and illnesses. Furthermore, participating in physical activities helps me foster social connections and improve emotional well-being (Farhud, 2015).

I believe that a structured schooling environment can at times, harm my health. I sometimes get headaches, feel as sense of unease, tightness, which leads me to feeling physically unwell. I find that stress often triggers headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, and can affect my appetites. Prolonged stress can cause serious health problems, including cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, a weakened immune system (Salleh, 2008). By grading young children, it may impose unnecessary stress which has the potential to lead to more serious health concerns down the line.

Personally, I love moving my body, but being compared to other students in a gym class environment made me feel like I was doing something wrong, since other students were getting

higher grades. It caused me to resent certain sports or activities that I enjoyed doing simply because I lost my confidence. Being in an environment where people are made to compete takes the joy out of the activity for me. I went from being super active when I was unschooled to feeling embarrassed and discouraged to participate in activities at school because I was afraid that I was doing it “wrong” which would result in a poor grade.

While in law school, therefore I attend the gym daily for about an hour and a half every morning. I find that that helps me to relieve stress and get my day started doing something I love. In addition, I take breaks as needed and make sure that I go for about a 1 hour walk daily. Again, unschooling has taught me to listen to myself and find what works for me. Ultimately, these strategies help me deal with my time in law school. Other people, however, might find different strategies like playing music, painting, yoga, or any number of things. There is not one recipe for everyone, and unschooling allows for people to personalize what works for them.

### ***Spirit***

A strong spirit helps individuals cope with challenges and fosters resilience. It typically correlates with a clear sense of purpose and leads to greater satisfaction and fulfillment. A strong spirit can also foster connections with people who share similar values and beliefs (Valliant, 2008). Furthermore, spirit is what binds and connects us together.

If a person’s spirit is negatively affected, it can impact various aspects of life. It may cause emotional distress, may lead to a sense of aimlessness, and decrease motivation. Another consequence is that it may affect how people interact with others and lead to irritability and cause conflicts in relationships. In educational settings, grading can have a significant impact on a person’s spirit and the connections that we make with others.

My sense of meaning and purpose have been challenged throughout my schooling career. I have struggled with loss of motivation when I feel like my hard work is not reflected in my grades. I feel like this has led to a lack of resilience and has caused me to fear change and facing new challenges, since I have cultivated a fear of failure. In addition, the perfectionist mindset has led to emotional exhaustion and burnout a few times in my schooling career. This is something I have had to work on, and I hope to not carry the weight of past failures into new endeavors. I worry about others as well, because the odd thing is that throughout my schooling, I have had what others would consider very high grades and I still feel this way. If I get a 98%, I sometimes obsess about why I could not achieve 100%, what did I do wrong? I know I should not feel this way, but I do.

So, on my walks I often talk and connect with people. When in Toronto my walking partner is my dad. We walk together daily. Now that I am in London, we are still able to connect on our walks together. He walks in Toronto, and I walk in London and we use WhatsApp the whole time. I also, talk to many friends and family both in Toronto and London. I find that staying connected is a great way to uplift my spirit. I am fortunate to have a number of friends that I have become close to in law school and we often connect and work together when appropriate.

### ***Emotions***

When I experience positive emotions, it contributes to a balanced emotional state and overall well-being. Positive emotions boost my motivation and energy levels and having positive emotions often increases my confidence and creativity, and helps me foster connections with others (Valliant, 2008).



In contrast, stress often leads to mood swings, irritability, and feeling emotionally drained. In addition, it can affect relationships if individuals are emotionally suffering. Creating a competitive environment puts an overemphasis on winning and often causes me to overlook the importance of learning.

I feel like competition often jeopardized my social relationships, which further amplified my emotional distress throughout my schooling career. The competitive nature within the classroom often brought out negative qualities in myself and my fellow classmates. In my experience, competing for the highest grades led to jealousy, resentment, and conflicts among students. It created an environment where collaboration felt less important than individual achievement. A competitive environment also increases stress and anxiety, lowers self-esteem, which I have experienced because of comparing my grades to other students. I hope that this awareness and this research will help me change the way I was conditioned, so that I do not approach adulthood with a competitive mindset.

While in law school, therefore, I am consciously trying to work cooperatively with others and I have developed an approach of lovingly helping others rather than creating a competitive environment. In law school I notice that many students are not open to sharing and cooperating and helping each other with assignments, even after a few of our professors vociferously encourage us to do just that. This is something that I am trying to change in my life.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, as part of being unschooled, I was never told that I can't do one thing or another because I am too young. If I felt the need to cook, I would cook, for example, regardless of my age. My parents trusted me and that if I felt that I could do it, then they stayed out of my way. This resulted in me doing whatever I needed to do regardless of my age, and it was this way all

my life. Hence, when I decided to attend law school in the UK, I did not think that I was too young or that I could not go over on my own and live on my own. In fact, I asked my parents not to accompany me there for the start of the school year and I made the trip over to the UK on my own. When I landed I grocery shopped and made my way to a local gym and signed myself up. I also applied for and was hired for a retail job before leaving Toronto. I explored and navigated my surroundings on my own. I knew that I could figure it all out and I did. Unschooling has given me the confidence and the understanding that I am capable. John Holt (2017) once said “all I am saying in this book can be summed up in two words—Trust Children” (p.xii). I am thankful that my parents trusted and continue to trust me.

Even when I chose to attend mainstream schooling, a lot of how I lived my life and the decisions I made were consistent with unschooling. Unschooling taught me that for me to be successful in law school, I must take charge of my learning. For example, only I know what I don't understand clearly after a lecture and so I must follow up and learn on my own. I must fill in the gaps in my understanding and I am the one who needs to do the work to fill in those gaps. Moreover, I have many options available to me. For example, I can look things up on the Internet or social media, or create a study group, or ask a friend, or attend office hours, or reach out to professors, and so on. In short, I can figure out what I need to do to learn the material that I don't understand. Unschooling has gifted me that understanding and confidence, and much of the learning I do daily is ungraded and within the unschooling philosophy yet learning still happens.

### ***Recommendations***

Based on my experience, I believe that ungraded assignments or grade free zones would have helped mitigate some issues that I uncovered above. I believe that ungrading would reduce pressure, encourage exploration, promote collaboration, and encourage lifelong learning. I

believe that without the stress of grades, I would have focused more on learning and understanding the topic instead of worrying about how well I would perform. Also, it would encourage my exploration by fostering my curiosity without fear of making mistakes. In addition, ungraded assignments would have promoted collaboration and caused me and my classmates to feel more inclined to share ideas and learn and grow and connect with each other. Finally, I think it would have fostered a deeper love of learning and help me build more confidence rather than instilling a fear of failure in me. While I was unschooling I remember the experience as learning for learning's sake and I remember my mind, body, spirit, and emotions feeling at peace. Holt (1989) writes, "living is learning. It is impossible to be alive and conscious (and some would say unconscious) without constantly learning things" (pg.157).

### ***Limitations***

All research is subject to limitations, and my qualitative autobiographical narrative study is no different. Due to the detailed nature of this study, these are just one individual's experiences, which means this type of research may not allow for generalizations. Given the methodology, the results I found might not be transferable to a particular group of people like a quantitative study may have done. However, conducting insider research has helped me understand what I am investigating in a way that an outsider might not be able to.

Issues of memory may be another issue. This research relies on me telling stories from my childhood, which may have become slightly fuzzy. Memory issues may arise if they have been repressed or due to the forgetfulness of human nature. This is a challenging aspect of conducting research using the autobiographical narrative as a methodology, since our brains may be misremembering certain aspects of our childhood. To reduce the effects of memory issues, I spoke with my family and read my old journal entries.

### ***Future Research***

For future research, I would like to have a greater class of people talking about their experiences with school and grading. In addition, studies may go beyond and investigate individuals that were unschooled their whole lives. This may allow researchers to understand the effects of not being graded better, to see if it is like my experience or if it goes even further.

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