

Apprenticeships: When schooling means more than doing

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Abstract

This paper is theoretically grounded in an educational movement known as unschooling. Unschooling is a learner centered democratic approach to education. Jerry Mintz (2004) defines learner-centered education as “an approach that is based on the interest of the student rather than curriculum driven, where someone else has the idea of what you ought to be learning,” and he defines democratic education as “education where students are actually empowered to make decisions about their own education and if they are in a school their own school.” This paper is about apprenticeship programs and how schooling and paper certificates have become more important in determining if someone can do a particular job than them actually doing it.

Mintz, J. (Speaker). (2004, July 28). Building democratic schools. *Radio Free School*. Retrieved November 25, 2005, from <http://www.radio4all.net/pub/archive/04.01.05/grassroots@hwcen.org/125-1-20040729-0728rfsc10.mp3>

In a graduate course that Carlo was teaching and Lisa was a student, there was a lot of discussion about the lack of connection between high school courses, literacy test scores and compulsory credits with being able to contribute meaningfully in the world we live. Although, we often hear and read about the connection between, for example,

“Dropouts are nearly twice as likely as high school graduates to be out of work, and earn 40 per cent less” (Brown, 2006), we believe that this is an artificially created connection. What we mean by this is that people are not less capable of working a particular job, for example, because they do not complete arbitrary requirements set up by schools, but they are not given a chance because they have not completed these arbitrary requirements. Schools act as gatekeepers and prevent people from being given a chance because of the mythical obstacles they place in people’s paths.

A recent newspaper article paraphrases Ontario education minister Sandra Pupatello’s concern that “Only 71 per cent of eligible students graduated in the 2004-05 school year, but the government’s new strategic high school transition plan hopes to improve that success rate to 85 per cent by 2010” (Canadian Press, 2006): Brown (2006) reports that this equates to 49,000 students who quit school each year. We see this as a clear sign that something is wrong with schooling and the arbitrary requirements that are not meeting people’s needs.

Clearly, many students fall short of the provincial expectations, but are the provincial expectations a good indication of an individual’s capability of performing a particular job? Many schoolers struggle with the provincial literacy test, compulsory credits, and even elective courses, but does this mean that they should be prevented from pursuing their chosen career because they have not fulfilled this arbitrary requirement? During one presentation that Carlo attended at the Ministry Days conference (a gathering of the Ontario Ministry and the faculties of education), one student was talking about his enrollment in the dual credit program: This is where a student can earn high school and college credits simultaneously. The student was twenty-one, very bright and doing well in

his chosen profession of becoming a tool and dye operator. Unfortunately, what was holding him back was one high school credit that he needed to complete to earn his Ontario Secondary School Diploma. This one credit was not directly connected to his success as a tool and dye operator, but served as an arbitrary obstacle.

Some of the teachers enrolled in the graduate course that we mentioned above, who are in the secondary system shared that the government has developed programs to help students get their missing credits and to find kids who have dropped out, and who are working already, to bring them back to schools so that they can earn their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. We believe that the knowledge students would gain from being forced or coerced into completing this is not valuable to the students except that without this arbitrary requirement doors are closed for these students or, more correctly, they need to find other creative ways to get to where they want.

Some schoolers who don't do well in high-school are encouraged to enter co-op programs or apprenticeship programs. This way they get to work in the field, learn from professionals, and hopefully get a job when they finish. As we will see, apprenticeships also have arbitrary requirements that are not connected to the work that people will ultimately do, and there is still schooling required. Although apprenticeships are a great way to learn by doing, and students get work experience and likely pay at the same time, there is still a college component that requires students to learn from a textbook and pass exams. Without the marks they don't pass. They don't get the certificate they need and they may not get hired. Society mistakenly believes that with a certificate they can do the job and without the certificate they cannot. In connection to this, we will share one of many similar stories that Carlo's friend, who owns a plumbing company, shared with him

about a certificate not equaling competence to do a particular job. Carlo's friend related how a prospective employee applied to his company and during the interview arrogantly bragged about how he was a licensed plumber. Carlo's friend rebutted that having a certificate and being a licensed plumber are not the same thing. When the prospective employee insisted, Carlo's friend took him up on it, handed him a package and told him that if he could run the job that started on Monday he would be hired. The prospective employee looked at the package and said that he could not. Clearly, being a licensed plumber and being able to DO is not the same thing. A similar story was related to Carlo by another friend who has a PhD in pharmacology and works at a local hospital. In this case, he shared how the newer licensed doctors prescribe medications that essentially cancel each other out. He related to Carlo how we have a false faith in the capability of licensed doctors to do their jobs.

About five years ago, Lisa's husband, Rob, was looking for work. Although he had a job in Ottawa, as a custodian at the university, he needed to find something closer to where they would be living. Not having any letters after his name, and very little post secondary education, his options were limited, to say the least.

Rob has never liked school. He tells Lisa horror stories about the notes he used to have to bring home from school. He remembers the names of all the "mean old" teachers who used to make his life miserable. He remembers all the times he was compared to his older brother (who got As in everything). He hated little school. He hated high school. Despite how hard he tried, he would never be as good at school as his brother, or as good at school as his parents expected, or as good at school as is valued by society. Despite the fact that school was hard and awful, he continued, and went to university. He didn't

go to university because he was really interested in something and wanted to achieve a certain degree. He didn't go because he knew which career path he wanted to follow. He went because he was supposed to. After a few years of pain and a couple of credits to his name, which are good for nothing, he decided to put himself out of his misery and quit. Although the stress of school was gone, the stress of finding a job and "being something," was still present. Luckily, the part-time custodian job in which he was working became a full time position. He now had a job, to make up for his failed attempts at a university degree and everything was great.

Then Lisa got a job out of town and they decided that they needed to move. This ruined everything. Where could he possibly get another job that paid as well, with no schooling? After staying at his job a few months longer, while searching for an alternative, he was saved. A close family friend, who worked for a major utilities company, had a position for him. He would be part of the first group of Electrical Apprentices, a new program for the company.

What a great opportunity! He would learn a trade, be trained on the job and have a "respectable" job at the end. No university, no papers to write. No pressure. And he only needed his high school grade 12 as a pre-requisite. Lisa now admits that she was relieved that he would have a job that would pay more than minimum wage. After all, she graduated from the university where they met, so why couldn't he try a little harder to finish, so he could get a good job? She now realizes how much she contributed to society's attitude that you need to go to school to be something. Lisa says, "My attitude now is way different, and is constantly changing as I read and learn more about the myth of schooling."

So the apprenticeship for Rob began with 10 men aged 18-40 from various parts of Ontario. They met in Toronto for a week's worth of orientation, safety meetings and so on. Each apprentice was then placed at a different station. The apprenticeship required 9800 hours of work and completion of a three part Construction Maintenance Electrician program at a community college. After that, they could write their Electrician exam to get their license.

Rob began his apprenticeship in the Toronto area where he worked for 6 months. He learned to repair tap changers, store transformers and how to handle oil. By working alongside a Journeyman he learned the skills necessary to be able to DO the job. He was able to work with other Journeymen or often times he worked with another apprentice who was also capable of doing the job, despite neither one of them having completed any of the "required schooling" that was part of the apprenticeship program.

During the next rotation he was placed at a station in Southern Ontario where he was required to drive back and forth each week and live in a cheap motel for more than a year, but he was told that each apprentice would need to travel for at least one of their placements. Rob and Lisa didn't really like the idea but Rob decided to comply; after all, he felt that he had no other job options because he had no schooling to fall back on. Throughout this placement Rob learned how to perform routine maintenance on transformers and breakers. Again, he learned new skills, without formal schooling.

Three months into this placement, Rob was summoned by the Ministry of Training and Apprenticeships to attend part 1 of his required electrical program. He registered for part 1- Residential Electrical courses which included shop, prints, code, theory and electronics. These courses focused on residential electricity. He was required

to learn about wiring residential things such as houses and pools. He needed to read electrical diagrams and memorize parts of the electrical code book. None of these tasks were connected to his work. He didn't wire houses, or use the electrical code book in his job. So why was he required to learn from a textbook and write exams regarding things that he didn't use? Why, on an exam, did he need to know how many outlets you can have on a branch circuit?

When people think of apprenticeships they think it is hands on learning. This first round of courses was exactly the opposite for Rob. The job itself was hands on, but the schooling was just that: School. It wasn't hands on or relevant or connected to his job. It was the same old school he had always hated.

When part 1 of the coursework was finished, Rob returned to his post in Southern Ontario. In the next rotation he was placed north of Toronto. Finally, a drive that was bearable. After another successful run in the field, Rob was sent to school for round two. Little did he know at that point how much he really did hate school and teachers.

Part 2 courses had a commercial focus. Courses included motors, fire alarm, and another round of theory and code. Again, Rob was forced to learn about things that were not part of his job. He had to learn from a textbook and try to pass exams, knowing that he wouldn't use the information. The other apprentices in his class (who worked for other employers) may have been able to relate, in their jobs, but for Rob it was school and he failed. This is where things get interesting. This is where the contradictions come out of the woodwork. This is where we raise so many questions.

According to the college that Rob attended, a pass is 70. According to his company's policy a pass is 60. According to electrical programs at other colleges, a pass

is 60. The college Rob attended allows one course to be lower than 70. Rob had two: A 66 and a 64 in fire alarm and motors respectively. Both of which have nothing to do with what he is required to know for his job. However, someone decided that electrical apprentices should be required to pass these courses. To add to the frustration, Rob and Lisa felt that the people who worked at the college were in no way prepared to help anyone who would not comply with their requirements and follow their procedures.

Rob phoned anyone and everyone who would listen. He contacted his union, his manager, and the apprentice coordinator at his work, the head of the electrical department at the college, and the Dean of Trades at the college. No one was interested in providing options for Rob to make up the 4% that he was short in one class. He got the run around for weeks. There was no such thing as a make up exam or extra assignment. They told him he would have to take the full 10 weeks over again. Now doesn't this sound like a great alternative for struggling high school students? And remember, his score was only off by 4%? Surely, any psychometrician would say that that is well within the margin of error. So many adults involved and they couldn't figure out how to make the situation right, over 4% in a course that was useless and meaningless to one of their students? The only option that the Dean offered was that he would recognize the course if Rob took it through another trades union. This was impossible, for a whole other set of political reasons. Suffice it to say that despite his efforts to get into the course, he did not. So, in the end, the college and the employer insisted he would need to repeat part 2. Rob flat out said, "I'm not doing it."

So he went back to work and no one mentioned anything for a while. Then the ultimatum came: Show up for school on this specific date or you'll be escorted from the

company property. Rob was ready to quit. Not only did he not want to go to school again, he didn't want to be told he had to. But there, looming over his head was the thought of having no job and no schooling and no income. This was also difficult for Lisa, knowing that if he quit, they would have some financial difficulty, and the thought of him having nowhere else to work was not a good one. Also knowing what Lisa knows about the arbitrary requirements and the politics of schooling, she was frustrated and furious at the way he was treated. They threatened to fire him! So he registered for school (which he had to pay for again). And he passed.

Having redeemed himself, he returned to his job after 10 weeks of schooling, which he found to be even more useless the second time around.

A short while later, Rob applied for a full-time position within his company (doing the same job he had been doing as an apprentice). He got it and would officially become a permanent employee in the New Year. All that was left was for him to complete was the third part of the college program, since he had already completed the required number of work hours. So once again it would be the schooling that would hold him back.

Well the New Year came, and the schooling was still unfinished. Rob continued to work with apprentice status knowing that once he finished his part 3 and wrote his electrician ticket, he would have his job. Then a funny thing happened.

Not long ago, Rob received a letter stating that his apprenticeship status would be terminated and he would be re-hired as a permanent employee. What great news! And how hypocritical? A year ago they offered to remove him from the premises because he didn't pass his courses and now, a year later, he has been hired regardless? What was the

point? Why did they put him through the agony of the courses, twice, just to throw back in his face that it meant nothing? He tried to tell them that the courses they insisted he repeat had nothing to do with his job. He was right and they obviously have confirmed that, by hiring him.

The even more ridiculous thing is that they still want him to finish his part 3 this summer. What for? He has the job. He can do the job, quite well. He has been doing the job for more than 5 years. What could he possibly need the courses for? Out one side of their mouths he's fired if he doesn't take the courses; out the other, he's capable of doing the job, and they hire him, without having completed the courses. And now, even though he can do the job, he needs to finish the courses.

What a mess this apprenticeship has been. In this case, the apprenticeship was not a great alternative to school. Although there was hands-on learning, it was not independent of textbooks and exams. There was still schooling involved. There were still useless textbooks and things to memorize to reiterate on multiple choice exams. There were still teachers (some who were not interested in helping you learn or pass) and there were still grades.

When Carlo introduced Lisa to authors like John Taylor Gatto, John Holt, Ivan Illich, and Wendy Priesnitz talking about what school does to kids and what really matters, Lisa can really connect it to this apprenticeship experience, and Rob's overall experience with school. What a great example to show that the purpose of making people study certain things (useless things) is to see if we can make them conform, because we want compliant, predictable people in the workplace. Well, Rob took the courses, and

yes, he complied. Lisa conclusion sums it up best when she says, “I am still left with so many questions, so many whys and what fors?”

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