

UNSCHOOLING IN MY TEACHING

by Dr. Carlo Ricci, Faculty of Education, Nipissing University

I teach for the Faculty of Education's Graduate Program at Nipissing University. When I first started teaching for them there was not a course in alternative education, so I proposed that we offer one, and I am pleased to report that the course was accepted and that it is now offered on a regular rotation at our various sites. Although I teach the alternative's course that addresses unschooling explicitly, I do not limit my inclusion of unschooling to that course, but instead I discuss it in all my courses and in every opportunity I get. What I try to do is to include it in the content of my courses, but also in the format that my courses take. In other words, I try to talk about it with my students and to live unschooling by modeling, as much as allowable given the institutional barriers, what it looks like in practice. I am pleased that students are hungry to learn more about it.

Schools are political driven institutions and unfortunately, universities are not much different. When I was teaching in the elementary panel and later in the secondary panel, I had very little control over what went on within my classroom community. I believe that it is not possible for a teacher at that level to incorporate the benefits of unschooling within mainstream schooling. I believe this for many reasons but will mention just two: First, teachers have to deliver an externally imposed curriculum, and second they have to fill out report cards. Both of these requirements are inconsistent with unschooling.

Although many that I speak to come to understand that incorporating the tenets of unschooling in a substantive way, is not possible in elementary and secondary mainstream schooling, fewer can see

that teaching in a post-secondary institution also offers similar challenges for those of us who choose to introduce the benefits of unschooling within our community of learners. Perhaps, this is the case because the concept of professors having academic freedom and tenure is so often cited.

I wish that I could report that in the classes that I teach I am totally satisfied with what happens and therefore unschooling's tenets prevail. Unfortunately, this is not necessarily possible. This is why earlier I qualified that I TRY as much as allowable to incorporate the unschooling philosophy within all of my courses. For example, I suggested to an institutional authority that I was planning to run a course without a formal course syllabus. I believe this would allow us more freedom since we can develop the course as we go along and not be hampered by a predetermined outline. I was told that according to university rules we have to have a course outline. I have found creative ways around this by having an outline that is tentative and that we do not have to follow, for instance, but I still have an outline. Having said this, I will share some things that I do and that the students report is refreshing and approaches unschooling's premises.

I share with my students how we are all victims of institutional control. I share with them that just because I work in a university does not mean that I do not have to capitulate to institutional authority. I share with them my frustration at how I am made to do things that I do not believe in and I then share with them the ways that I have developed in an attempt to resist this institutional authority. One thing I do, then, is to

do just this: I name the problems that I face in trying to offer an unschooling approach.

As I name this, I share with them how I do not feel comfortable placing numbers on people and I try to get them to understand the game and how it is played. I try and diminish the importance of numbers by giving them assignments where everyone gets 100%. I then share with them that unfortunately I cannot give everyone 100%, but fortunately I, in my present position, can and do get the support to get pretty close. I have to qualify and say "in my current position" because I have worked for other universities and departments in the past that did not allow me the same opportunity. For example, when I was teaching a philosophy of education course at the undergraduate level for a large university they punished me for noncompliance. I gave my students grades that I believed they deserved and for that I received a letter from the chair of the division asking me to review the institutions grading policies. Their policies outlined that if I had a class of 40 students, for example, I was only allowed to give a small number of As and Bs and the rest of the grades had to be Cs and so on. I did not feel comfortable doing this, and so they did not ask me back to teach.

We have to ask ourselves, why it is that not all students can get As. The main reason, I believe, is that universities are ultimately businesses that rely on tuition to run. If all students earn high grades then they all earn scholarships and if they all earn scholarships then the university will go broke. There are other reasons as well, but I believe that the one I mentioned is a significant one. In my current

position, students are not in a position to earn scholarships and so, I do not have to contend with this facet.

I believe that the students deserve the high grades that they get. Their work is of high quality and I believe that in many cases we suffer from grade deflation and not grade inflation. Besides, if I look at my own experience most of what I have learned that is of any value to me I have learned without being tested on it in any way. For instance, when I attend conferences or read books that I choose or talk to people I am not formally tested in any way, yet my learning is considerable.

On the topic of assignments, I do not tell them what to do or what to write about or even limit their assignments to ones that involve writing. I share with them that there are many mediums whereby humans have learned that they can communicate a message and that they are free to choose whichever medium they decide. I have people write poetry, create art works, power points, and even knit a scarf. Yes! Knit a scarf. For me this assignment was among the most powerful because it meant that the student had internalized what I believe is among the most significant contributions that unschooling has to offer; namely, that it is up to the individual to decide what she wants to learn. I have shared this story with some people and at first they all look at me with the same stare of disbelief, "How can you let a graduate student submit a knitted scarf as an assignment?" Then I simply explain that inspired by her grandmother, she had always wanted to learn to knit. Unfortunately, her grandmother passed away before she asked her to show her how. Fortunately, her neighbour is also a knitter and so she finally asked her to show her how, and she knitted it. She learned what she has always wanted to learn. This experience contributed to her growth much more than writing yet another traditional paper would

have. Once those who stare at me in disbelief hear this narrative, then they have all agreed that this was an invaluable experience for her—and for me. It reminded me that I should not impose on others what they learn, but that I should support and create environments where students feel comfortable to learn what THEY choose.

Another thing I do is to ensure that we are the curriculum. In terms of the curriculum, I never allow the outlined curriculum to take precedence over what we in the room want to talk about. The curriculum needs to come from within us, within the people in the room and not be a preset list of expectations.

One of unschooling's main differences from mainstream schooling is compulsory attendance. Mainstream schooling needs to force students with rewards and punishments and legal sanctions to ensure that students attend their schools. I cannot stomach this and so in my classes, I do not punish students who are absent with extra assignments nor do I insist that they make it up in some way. Instead, I trust that they can set their own priorities. I have never had anyone miss a large amount of class time. I like to think that this is because the format inspired by unschooling leads to a rich learning experience for us all.

Some argue that ultimately, I was schooled. Suffice it to say that I had a very poor schooling experience. I initially did not get into university after high school because my grades were too low. I simply refused to conform to their dictates and for that they failed me out of the system. When I conformed they let me back in. In the end, it took me a year to complete my master's and a year to complete my PhD while I was working full time as a teacher. I mention this because it is a reminder for me that no one can predict anyone's future potential—despite

many teachers, including mine, believing otherwise.

Even while I was completing my master's and PhD I still felt that schooling stood in the way of my learning. I wanted to read certain books and write certain things but I could not do this fully because I had to read and write what the professors asked of me. I try not to make the same mistake in my classes. Again, students can choose to read whatever they like and to do whatever they like despite what the course outline says. Some believe that my degree is in holistic education and alternative schooling and so on because I know so much about it and this is what I teach. The truth is that I have never taken a formal course nor schooled in any of these areas. Everything I learned I learned on my own. I also find it lacking that so many professors that I speak to who are in faculties of education and so many educators who teach in schools do not even know about these alternatives to mainstream schooling. Why isn't this information made more public?

Doing all of this, many would think, diminishes their learning experience and lowers standards. In fact, the exact opposite happens. Since students have a real choice in what they do, they are empowered. Furthermore, the level of discussion and the learning that goes on, I include myself as a learner, is considerable and astounding.

I would like to begin my conclusion with some reference to how students react to my approach. One measure we as professors have that seemingly gauges how well students are responding to what we are doing is the anonymous course evaluations that all students have an opportunity to fill out. In the last round I received an overall score of 4.82 out of 5. One friend of mine who is a statistician suggested that it may not be possible statistically to get a higher rating. Again, I mention this not to brag but to attest the value of this approach.

In terms of student comments, I get a lot of positive feedback from students in person and, some believe more significantly, in the anonymous course evaluations. In the last round I received 20 comment sheets and not one had anything negative to say. Here is a sample. One student wrote the following:

I truly enjoyed the democratic environment. The issues (and much of the content) was relevant because it related to our interests. By establishing our own curriculum, I've learned the benefits of such a strategy within my own classroom.

As well, faculty members tell me what students tell them about my approach. And the same students show up in my classes again and again. In fact, one student who lives in the GTA inquired about how much a flight to Timmins was so that he could take the course with me.

I have students who claim to disagree with some of the things that I have to say and yet they, in several cases that I am thinking of, are taking their third and fourth courses with me. This tells me that there is something drawing them to this learner centered democratic approach that truly respects human freedom and agency. What I find sad is that they feel that it is working for them but may not believe it will work for those they teach. In other words they embrace it as students but not as teachers.

In conclusion, these are some of the things that I do. Again, I am not totally satisfied but I feel that I am headed in the right direction. I still have to place numbers on people, give them assignments, provide them with an outline and so on, but by gently massaging these institutional dictates I believe the approach is a more democratic and learner centered one. I will continue to challenge the myth propagated by schools and their supporters and invite others to do the same. People made the rules and people can

change them. I find that by offering this approach we learn more and not less—is this not the point, after all?

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I am pleased to invite submissions for the inaugural issue of the new, online peer-reviewed publication, the Journal of Unschooling and Alternative Learning (JUAL), to be published as papers become accepted. Authors of original research interested in submitting manuscripts to be considered for publication in JUAL should review the JUAL home page (<http://www.nipissingu.ca/jual/index.asp>), and the Submissions for detailed information on submission requirements.

JUAL seeks to bring together an international community of scholars exploring the topic of unschooling and alternative learning, which espouses learner centered democratic approaches to learning. JUAL is also a space to reveal the limitations of mainstream schooling.

JUAL understands learner centered democratic education as individuals deciding their own curriculum, and participating in the governance of their school-if they are in one. Some examples of learner centered democratic possibilities are unschooling, Sudbury Valley, Fairhaven, the Albany Free School, and The Beach School in Toronto. In terms of unschooling, we view it as a self-directed learning approach to learning outside of the mainstream education rather than homeschooling, which reproduces the learning structures of school in the home. It will offer readers relevant theoretical discussions and act as a catalyst for expanding existing knowledge in specific areas of practice and/or research on learning

relevant to the journals mandate. The journal will be available at <http://www.nipissingu.ca/jual/index.asp> as a free publication containing material written in French or English. JUAL will initially be published as articles become accepted for publication. When enough articles to make an issue are available, we will publish them as an issue.

I invite you to circulate this announcement to colleagues, graduate students, researchers and/or organizations who may be interested in submitting a manuscript to JUAL for consideration.

Questions can be addressed to the editors of JUAL by contacting Carlo Ricci at carlor@nipissingu.ca.

**Be who you are and say
what you feel, because
those who mind don't
matter, and those who
matter don't mind.
Dr. Seuss**

(cont. from page 5)

reported, he tells WND. By Bob Unruh, © 2006 WorldNetDaily.com

<http://tinyurl.com/yd7ugl>

Constitutional amendment for homeschoolers? Michael Farris, cofounder of the Home School Legal Defense Association and chancellor of Patrick Henry College has called for an amendment to the U. S. Constitution to protect the rights of parents to educate their children at home. This is an unalienable, God-given right that is not recognized under international law. Dr. Samuel L. Blumenfeld, December 6, 2006.

<http://www.homeschool.com>

This website offers teleconferences a few time per year. They also sell tapes of previous conferences with interviews of such people as Christopher Paolini.