

Unschooling

One of the assumptions built into the conventional version of K-12 schooling, private and public, is that, out of all of human knowledge, there is some subset the right size to occupy most of twelve years of school that everyone needs to know. That assumption is false. There is a very short list of skills — reading, writing or typing and arithmetic are the ones that occur to me — that almost everyone will find worth learning. Beyond that, the standard curriculum is for the most part an arbitrary list of what happens to be in fashion, the subjects everyone is required to pretend to learn.

Consider, as examples, English composition, American history, algebra, geometry, and biology. What is taught in high school classes on each will prove very useful to some people, occasionally useful to more, and almost entirely useless to many. Although practically every American high school graduate is supposed to have learned all of those things, many, probably a large majority, have not, as anyone who has taught college freshmen can testify.

Consider my wife's experience teaching a geology lab for non-majors at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. A substantial minority of the students did not know that the volume of a rectangular solid, a hypothetical ore body, was the length times the height times the depth. Those students would have been from the top quarter or so of high school graduates in Virginia and practically all of them would have taken a class in geometry.

A second assumption is that the way for children to learn things is to be told what they must learn today, assigned some reading, and set down to listen to a teacher. One result is that children spend most of their time being told things they have no interest in knowing. Another, given the diversity of interests and abilities, is that a third of the pupils in a classroom are bored because they already know what is being taught, a third are bored because they are completely lost, and only the middle third are, with luck, listening, understanding and learning. A sufficiently good teacher can improve those numbers somewhat, but sufficiently good teachers are scarce.

One result is that many children, and the adults those children become, regard education as unpleasant work to be avoided when possible. Another is that schools spend six years teaching things such as arithmetic that the average kid could learn in a year or two if he wanted to. A third is that we end up with high school graduates many of whom, perhaps a majority, do not actually know many of the things they have spent all those years pretending to learn. As all students and most teachers know, the usual result of making someone study something of no interest to him is that he memorizes as much as he has to in order to pass the course then forgets it as rapidly as possible thereafter.

The flip side of that, routinely observed by parents, is that children can put enormous energy and attention into learning something that really interests them — the rules of D&D, the details of a TV series, the batting averages of the top players of the past decade. Quite a long time ago, we got our kids Gameboys with Pokemon cartridges. At about the same time I heard a lady on talk radio explaining that kids who got high tech toys played with them for half an hour or so and then put them on the shelf. My estimate is that Bill and Becca logged something like eighty hours a month, perhaps more, on those cartridges for many months thereafter, more work and more attention than I, at a similar age, put into all of my schoolwork combined, and continued to play the game at a reduced rate for years thereafter. The skill they were learning, how to find their way around the Pokemon world and accomplish goals therein, was in one sense useless, since the world was a

fictional one. But being able to find one's way around a new environment and accomplish things within it is a very useful skill.

In the standard model of schooling, someone else decides what is true and then feeds it to you. Living by that approach is a dangerous policy in the real world and not entirely safe even in the context of school: Many of us remember examples of false information presented to us by teachers or textbooks as true.¹ A better policy is, wherever possible, to find information, assemble and judge it for yourself.

Since there is never enough time to check everything your sources tell you, doing that requires the ability to evaluate sources of information on internal evidence. Does this author sound as though he is making an honest attempt to describe the arguments for and against his views, the evidence and its limits, to present and respond to the best arguments against his positions, or is he trying to snow the reader? Researching online, whether for curiosity or argument, is one way of practicing that skill; the web is an unfiltered medium, so anyone browsing and not brain dead soon realizes that the fact that someone on the web says something is at best weak evidence that it is true. The skill is anti-taught by a model of education in which the student is presented with two authorities, the teacher and the textbook and, unless the teacher is an unusually good one, instructed to believe what they tell him.

There are alternatives to the conventional model.² The one we chose is unschooling, leaving our children free to control their own time, learn whatever they find of interest, providing suggestions — which they are free to ignore — and support. Put them in an environment that offers many alternative sources of information: web access, people to talk with, visits to the library. If at some future time they discover that something they need was left out of their education, they can learn it then, as our children did with several subjects after deciding that they would help them to do well on the SAT exams needed to get into a good college. That is a more efficient strategy than trying to learn everything they might ever find useful, most of which they won't.

Our choice of that strategy was based largely on my and my wife's experience. I went to a first-rate private school, the same school to which Obama later sent his children, my wife to a good suburban public school. Both of us had a few good teachers and classes, but what we most remember is being bored most of the time. I learned more about the English language reading Kipling's poetry for fun and going through a book or two a day, largely Agatha Christie and her

¹ My standard example from my own experience at a very good private school is a piece of simple physics. The textbook for Driver's Education claimed that a head-on collision between two cars, each going fifty miles an hour, was equivalent for each to running into a brick wall at a hundred miles an hour. I concluded that that could not be true, and produced a proof — that a sheet hung precisely between the two cars would act like a perfectly immobile wall, since, by symmetry, neither of the identical cars could pass it.

The Driver's Ed teacher, to his credit, replied that he did not know if it was true, only that the book said it was, so we agreed to take it to the physics teacher — who insisted that the book was right. He offered no rebuttal to my proof, merely the argument that since he was the teacher he was right. I have always regretted that I did not happen to encounter him after I got a PhD in physics so that I could tell him that by his own criterion, argument by authority, he was now wrong.

² A different one, which I encountered when I gave a talk in Oregon and was asked to also speak at a local private high school, is the [Delphian School](#). Their model, which they describe as proficiency based learning, consists of independent study by the students monitored and directed by the faculty with, so far as I could tell, relatively little time spent in class. The school has connections to the Church of Scientology, about which I have considerable reservations, and is, I conjecture, largely a boarding school for the children of members, but the model is an interesting one. There are doubtless others that I have not encountered.

competitors, during summer vacation, than I did in English class. I learned more about political philosophy arguing with my best friend than I did in social science. We thought we could do better for our children.

I sometimes describe the process as throwing books at them and seeing which ones stick.

Our Experience

A little while after moving to California we heard about a local Sudbury school, new that year, and brought our daughter over to visit. She decided she preferred it to the Montessori school she was attending, so we enrolled her. A few years later we added her brother, a few years after that shifted to home unschooling.

Unschooling at a Sudbury school includes classes if students ask for them. When our daughter was about ten there was a math class, with students of varying ages and ability, lasting somewhat over a year. It started assuming the students knew nothing, ended with the early stages of algebra. That is pretty much all of the formal instruction either of them had until, much later, they took a few college classes at the university where I taught.³ In addition, we nagged them into memorizing the multiplication tables, which are useful to know but boring to learn. That was the closest thing to compulsory learning in their education. Our daughter, as an adult, thinks even that was a mistake.

How did they get educated? They both read a lot; although many of the books they read were children's books, pretty early they were also reading books intended for adults. When our daughter was about nine we were traveling and ran out of books for her to read, so she read the Elizabeth Peters books, historical novels about the early years of Egyptian archaeology that her mother had brought along for her own reading, and liked them.

Betty remembered having read and learned from *How To Lie With Statistics*, a book about how not to be fooled by statistical arguments, so we got a copy and both kids liked it. Our son played D&D and other games with dice rolling, so was interested in learning how to calculate probabilities. It turned out that the same author and illustrator had produced *How to Take a Chance*, a book on simple probability theory; we got it and he read it multiple times. The result was an eleven or twelve year old who could calculate the probability of rolling 6 or under with three six-sided dice.

For some years his hobby was creating games. At a World Science Fiction Convention in Los Angeles he had an interesting and productive conversation with Steve Jackson of Steve Jackson games concerning a game Bill had invented. He did not succeed in his ambition to get a board game commercially published by age sixteen and is now trying to get published as a fiction author. As of the time I am writing this he has not yet done it but I have, and he is a better novelist than I am.

Both kids spent a lot of time online. We discovered that Bill had taught himself to type when the family was playing a networked game on the home network — *Diablo* or *Diablo II* — and misspelled words started appearing on our screen. He needed to type because he played games online and wanted to be able to communicate. Later he wanted to learn how to spell so that he would not look stupid to the people he was communicating with. His sister spent a good deal of time with *World of Warcraft*, some of it writing up battle reports and other essays to be posted on

³ Most of the schools they were applying to did not know how to evaluate home schooled students and so wanted grades from somewhere for the admissions process.

suitable web sites. She too wanted her writing to look good and so consulted, usually with her mother, on how best to say things.

I am fond of poetry and know quite a lot of it. When our daughter was very little, I used it to put her to sleep. Some time thereafter we were driving somewhere at night and heard a small voice from the back seat: "Lars Porsena of Clusium, by the nine gods he swore" — the opening line of "Horatius at the Bridge" — in a two year old's lisp. She now knows quite a lot more poetry. When I put my son to bed — my wife and I took turns — we generally talked for a while, then he asked for poems or stories.

I read and recommended to my daughter Duff Cooper's excellent biography of Talleyrand.⁴ She noticed the references to Talleyrand's memoirs and decided that, since some of her writing involved politics, it would be interesting to learn about it from a world class practitioner. I found her an English translation.

The largest part of our children's education, after reading, was conversation. We talked at meals. We talked when putting one or the other of them to bed. My daughter and I went for long walks at night and spent them discussing the novel I was writing or the characters she roleplayed on *World of Warcraft*.

When she was about eleven, she decided that she was seriously interested in music and would like to play the harp. She took lessons, practiced because she wanted to, not because we made her. In later years she participated regularly in two choirs, one at her mother's church, one specializing in early music. Two of her online friends were a French-Canadian couple; she decided that since they had learned her language, she should learn one, chose not French but Italian, which she had been exposed to in early music and liked. The college I taught at had a young scholars program that let high school students enroll in college courses during the summer, presumably intended to recruit bright high school students. She took a quarter of Italian and then, since she wasn't going to school, two more during the school year. She worked harder in that course, with no pressure from us, than I ever worked at a course in high school, college, or graduate school, ended up, when she finally went to college, majoring in Italian literature.

I am fond of evolutionary biology, so recommended *The Selfish Gene* to my daughter. She liked it, found the approach intriguing and read other books on the subject. She audited several of the classes I taught at the law school, following them at the level of the better students.

Our children ended what would have been their high school years not knowing several of the things on the standard curriculum — as do many of those subject to it. But my son learned more history and geography from books and computer games than he would have learned in high school history classes, while avoiding the fatal lesson that learning is boring work to be avoided whenever possible. My daughter had some catching up to do in math before she was ready for college but both, as kids, regarded solving two equations with two unknowns and integer solutions as an entertaining puzzle.

One problem for home schooling parents is how to get their children into college. Our daughter did not have grades, a list of courses taken or recommendations from high school teachers, so needed another way of convincing colleges of her ability. Standardized tests were one obvious solution. She spent some time studying for the SAT exams, but much less than the time she would have put in on those subjects in any conventional school, did extremely well on the verbal,

⁴ Which I had read due to encountering Talleyrand not in a history class but a Kipling short story.

tolerably on the math; her combined score was well within the range for the students at the very selective liberal arts colleges she applied to. She supplemented that with a list of books she had read — four hundred of them. The admissions officer at St. Olaf's, the one school that accepted her at which she had no family connection, told us that that was what blew them away.

Many schools require two of the SAT II achievement tests, especially significant for a home-schooled student. It turned out that "literature" was not, as I had feared, a test of what you have read but of how well you can read; while the books she had read were not selected to fit a high school reading list, she reads very well. For a second subject she chose American history, read all of Paul Johnson's *A History of the American People* — well written and opinionated, so not boring — plus part of a book of primary source material. She spent a good deal of time in the week before the exam using Wikipedia to compile her own time line of Presidents and what happened during their terms. The results of both exams were satisfactory.

She entered college knowing much more about economics, evolutionary biology, music, renaissance dance, and how to write than most of her fellow students, less than some about physics, biology, world history, except where it intersected historical novels she had read or subjects that interested her. She knew much more than most of them about how to educate herself. And why. When a college class she had been looking forward to got cancelled, she was shocked to discover that the other students were happy.

Problems and Solutions

In discussing our approach to education with other people, a number of different questions get raised. Unschooling, which can be done either at home or in a school, raises one set of issues, home schooling another. One advantage to doing it online was that I not only got good questions from commenters on my blog but also good answers.

Unschooling

One point raised in comments on my unschooling posts was that, as an adult, you will sometimes have to do things you don't like, a lesson we can teach our children by making them study things they are not currently interested in. It is a real problem but, I think, the wrong solution.

One way of teaching our children what the real world is like is to put them in a synthetic world designed to imitate the real one. To teach them that they will sometimes have to work to accomplish things even if they don't want to, we assign them homework they are not interested in doing and reward them with grades. If grades don't work well enough, we reward the grades with cash, as some parents do.

What this approach leaves out is the causal connection between the work and the accomplishment. Someone else has told you to do unpleasant work, someone else will reward you for doing it, but there is, from your standpoint, no logical connection between the two. Doing homework does not, so far as you can tell, actually produce money.

The alternative to a synthetic world is a real world, the one we and our children are living in. If you don't tune your harp, it will not sound very nice when you play it. If you don't tidy up your room, at least occasionally, you will not be able to find things you want. If you don't sometimes do things your younger brother wants you to do, he won't do things you want him to do. That world also teaches the lesson that getting what you want sometimes requires doing things you would rather not do. And it gets the causal connection right.

Similarly for what one commenter referred to as work skills, such as showing up on time. The real world, even the real world of children, provides training in that too. When my son was running a D&D game, he had to have that week's adventure ready each week when his players arrived for the game. When my daughter was part of a World of Warcraft guild that ran a regular raid, she had to be available when the raid was scheduled to start.

Another concern raised was that, as one commenter put it, "If the kid has no interest in learning stuff, and no one pushes him to learn the stuff, he'll just never learn it."

To which one commenter replied:

It's much more likely that a kid will be interested in something than that he will be interested in the particular things a school wants him to learn today.

And another:

Spend some time with a child who hasn't yet gone to kindergarten, then call me when you're tired of the questions. Then spend some time with a schooled child, and ask them what they think of learning. The experience will be enlightening.

A student may not know what things he needs to learn as well as a curriculum designer, but he knows much more about what he wants to learn. If he needs the material presented in an organized form, there are always books, and the best book available to him on any subject will have been written by someone who knew a great deal more about it than the people who design high school curricula.

Home Schooling

One common concern is that home schooled children will miss out on the social skills they could acquire by interacting with other children at school. That is possible — the first home schooled children I met, fifty-some years ago, felt socially clumsy. The one of them I still know to some degree still does. But then, I went to school, and it did not keep me from being in some ways socially backwards too. So did my wife, and she was a graduate student before she went on her first date.⁵

The problem with the social lesson that a conventional school teaches is that it is social interaction in a population almost perfectly age segregated, where everyone is engaged in roughly the same activities. That is not what the world they will experience as adults will be like.

As one person put it:

our public school system is really quite unique, and profoundly unnatural that way, it is as if someone read *Lord of the Flies* and decided it was prescriptive rather than descriptive.⁶

From an observer of other people's home schooled children:

⁵ With me.

⁶ Jehu, on [Robin Hanson's blog](#), commenting on why he finds home schooled children more likable than public school children)

Twenty or so homeschool kids getting together and playing and socializing is really a thing to see. Simply put they generate a very low amount of trouble relative to a similarly sized group of their counterparts with very little supervision required.

From a commenter whose home-schooled children had much more organized socializing than ours:

Just this week, my 9-year-old son has the following outside activities planned: two 1-hour PE classes at a local gym (with kids ages 8 to 12), a Geography Bee, a gingerbread house building party, an afternoon of bowling (with kids ages 6 to 14), and a lake cruise to watch bald eagles feasting on Kokanee. Next week he has more PE, a game day with other 4th graders, and a Christmas party. That's not even counting his time with neighborhood friends, family members, and people in the community.

As another home schooling parent reported on my blog:

My kids are around adults all day - the grocery store, servicemen that come to the house, the car mechanic, etc. They're not stuck in a room with people their own age who don't speak well either. My kids amaze adults with their language skills. This, again, is not because they're genius kids. This is because their environment allows for it and encourages it.

When our daughter went to college, she found that she interacted much more easily with the adults than with her fellow students. That was not surprising, considering that she had interacted with adults a good deal in the course of growing up: our friends, the adult participants in her and her mother's shared activities in early music and renaissance dance, and a wide range of people online.

Does home schooling require a stay at home parent? We did it that way — my wife quit her job to be a full time wife and mother before we had our first child. But data from the National Center for Educational Statistics show that, as of 2016, only 55% of home schooled children came from two parent families where only one worked, with 11% from one parent families.⁷ One commenter described how it was possible:

I have known single parents, for example, who swapped child care and rides to the kids' activities with another family while their children were young, arranging their work schedules accordingly. A single university professor paid for child care during her classes, and took her well-behaved youngsters along to office hours and other functions. A hairdresser swapped haircuts and math tutoring for child care while she worked. A husband-firefighter and wife-social worker arranged for their long shifts to be on different days, making sure that one adult was always home, and they still usually had two days a week together as a family.

As children get older, it gets easier, as the kids need less constant looking after and become more competent at taking care of themselves for part of the day. Homeschooled children often have many activities they attend outside the home anyway, and seeing to them for those times may become just a task of finding them rides with other families.

⁷ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp

Teens, of course, typically become very independent. The unschooled ones are used to deciding what to do with their unscheduled time and don't need someone directing them all day. I don't know any that aren't really busy.

Unschooling is all the time, every day, and helping make family life work for everyone is part and parcel of it. Homeschooling, as in school-at-home, can be done any time that works for a particular family.

Home schooling can be costly in parental time, but it does not have to be. In our experience, the adult time required was largely conversation at dinner, putting kids to bed, doing things with our kids most of which we would have been doing without them, although it might have taken more of our time if we had been trying to follow a curriculum modeled on conventional schools. The rest of our kids' education consisted of reading books, playing educational computer games, browsing the web, none of which required parental involvement.. And home schooling is much less costly in student time. Both my wife and I wasted thousands of hours sitting in classes not learning. Our children didn't.

A second and related issue sometimes raised is that home-schooling parents have to be well enough educated to play the role of teachers, not in one subject but in all. But the only skills that most children have to learn are reading, handwriting, and arithmetic, all of which most adults are competent in. Children will want to learn, and should learn, a lot of other things, but not particular things — their education can to a considerable degree consist of learning whatever their parents happen to know. Beyond that there are books, free online classes such as the Khan Academy, things they can learn from friends. Older children can take classes at community colleges. If there is something a child very much wants to learn and no other way of learning it, parents can pay a teacher, as we did for our daughter's harp lessons.

And there are other ways of learning, not all of which cost money:

When my son wanted to build a sophisticated computer from scratch (and I don't mean Walmart Plug and Play) - way beyond my technical skill - we simply asked at a computer sales/repair business. The business owner was more than happy to trade his expertise for some help in the store from an "apprentice." I still don't know anything about computers, but my son is quite technically proficient and an excellent math student, and is actually considering pursuing a degree in computer engineering.

Son learned HTML and game programming (using existing software) from books, computer experimentation, and working with other geeky kids. Then he took networking and other technical classes at community college, very successfully. Instructor there took additional mentoring steps with our son, for which we were grateful.

My kids belonged to an engineering club run by a homeschool/dad engineer, and they attended a great science program (JASON) conducted at a homeschool co-op.

And so on.

Unschooling and homeschooling don't mean hiding at home. "The world is your classroom." As my older kids have gotten older, my job became that of facilitator - to help them figure out how to get the education or experience they require to meet their goals. Because I'm the adult, I generally have more experience and knowledge about how

to network to make that happen, but believe me, by the time they are older teens, they are pretty clear that whatever they want to do and need to learn, someone is out there who can provide that, either formally or informally. And, they begin to take on more and more of handling those arrangements themselves — something that is often overlooked when people are listing the advantages of homeschooling — it is great for developing initiative and allowing parents to model productive, functional ways of working in the world.

I meet homeschool parents all the time who find creative ways to facilitate all kinds of technical and specialized education for their kids. Often those who think of the school model as the default for education have a difficult time with true "outside-the-box" thinking. However, homeschoolers, who are accustomed to flourishing in the margins, are quite adept at finding unique and effective ways to meet children's INDIVIDUAL needs, thus preparing them well to be productive and contributing members of their communities.

Who Homeschools?

Much hostility to home schooling comes from the belief that home-schoolers are mostly uneducated Christian fundamentalists trying to keep their children ignorant of evolution and sex education. That does not fit the NCES survey data.⁸ As of 2015-16, only 16% of home schooling parents gave “a desire to provide religious instruction” as the most important reason for home schooling, just below the 17% who chose “a dissatisfaction with academic instruction at other schools.” The most common reason, 34%, was “a concern about the environment of other schools, such as safety, drugs, or negative peer pressure.”⁹ So far as the educational background of home-schooling parents, 30% had a bachelor’s degree, an additional 15% a graduate or professional school degree.¹⁰ For parents whose children attend a school, public or private, the figures were nearly identical: 27% with a bachelor’s degree, 17% with a graduate or professional school degree.

Compulsion, Incentives, and Literacy

Reading is a useful skill. If you want people to learn it, one obvious starting point is to ask what they would enjoy reading, since it is easier to get someone to do something if he likes doing it. The answer might be comic books, car magazines, science fiction, fantasy, soap opera summaries, D&D rule books, or any of a wide variety of other sorts of written material.

That is not the approach taken by conventional K-12 schooling. The books students are assigned to read are chosen either because they are viewed as good literature — famous books from the past or current books that English professors approve of — or because they teach lessons that the people selecting the books want taught. That could be religion, patriotism, acceptance of homosexuality, or any of a wide range of other lessons, depending on political and educational fashion. While they might be books students enjoyed reading — I am very fond of Kipling, some of whose stories might be assigned reading in an English class — that is not what they would be chosen for, so the odds are not very good.

⁸ <https://nces.ed.gov/nhes/homeschooling.asp>. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017102.pdf> Table 8 gives information on reasons for home schooling, 7 on education of home schooling parents.

⁹ <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2017/2017102.pdf>

¹⁰ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_206.10.asp

The ability to read is useful to almost everyone. Appreciation for great literature, even if we accept the educational establishment's definition of what qualifies, no doubt can enrich one's life, but on the evidence of what people actually read it does not enrich the lives of a very large fraction of the population. That suggests that learning the former should have higher priority than learning the latter. In an educational environment where teachers can advise and persuade pupils but not compel them, it will, because teachers who insist on telling their pupils to read books that the teacher likes and the pupil does not will soon find their advice ignored.¹¹ In an environment where teachers can tell students what books to read and grade down those who fail to obey, on the other hand, there will be a strong temptation to assign the books that the teacher thinks the student ought to read, sacrificing the higher priority of literacy for the lower priority of literature — or, sometimes, propaganda.

Which may explain why Johnny can't read.

I encountered a different version of the same logic a good many years ago in my own work. My *Price Theory* textbook was out of print. I decided to rewrite it into a book targeted at the proverbial intelligent layman, the sort of book that gets read for the fun of it while teaching the reader the basics of an academic subject. My model, insofar as I had one, was *The Selfish Gene*, a book from which I learned quite a lot about evolutionary biology.

There was an important difference between the book I had written and the book I was writing; since the latter was not a textbook, nobody would be forced to read it.¹² If at any point the reader decided that it was not worth continuing, I would lose him. To deal with that problem I followed a deliberate policy of starting each chapter with a hook, a puzzle that would sufficiently engage the reader to persuade him to finish the chapter to find the solution. Economics is full of such puzzles; I do not know how hard it would be to do the same thing in another field.

The result, [*Hidden Order: The Economics of Everyday Life*](#), has been one of my most successful books. Incentives matter—including mine.

The Sudbury Model

Unschooling does not have to be home schooling. Sudbury Valley School and schools modeled on it follow an unschooling model — students control their own time, a class only happens if students ask a staff member to teach it. Our children attended such a school for some years.¹³ Eventually problems developed with the school and we switched to home unschooling. Why?

The Sudbury model has two elements: freedom and democracy. Browsing the web, I found the following in the description of one Sudbury school:

Sudbury schools are run democratically, ensuring that students have the freedom to direct their own education.

That statement, like similar statements in other contexts, confuses democracy with freedom. That a school is democratically run does not mean that a student can direct his own education, it means

¹¹ A commenter on one of my blog posts offered a link to an [interesting account](#) of someone doing education right, a mathematician showing a group of high school age kids what math was good for and why it was fun.

¹² In the interest of honesty, I should add that some people are forced to read *Hidden Order* because it is occasionally used as a textbook, even though that was not the purpose it was written for.

¹³ Cedarwood Sudbury School in San Jose. It ceased operations at the beginning of 2010, about six years after we left.

that a group of students and faculty can direct the education of everyone — just as the fact that a country is democratic does not tell us how free it is. A school run democratically, by majority vote of students and staff, is vulnerable to the usual risks of democratic breakdown — a coalition that can get control of the school's internal political and judicial system has a great deal of power to control everyone else, bullying with official support. When that happened, we left.¹⁴ My estimate is that by that time the average student was spending five or six hours a week in judicial committee, school meeting, and the like.

That was in a tiny school; I do not think enrollment ever got above the low twenties. I do not know how the same issues would play out on a larger scale or how they have played out in the original Sudbury school. Part of the idea of unschooling is that the student gets to decide what he wants to learn, but in a Sudbury School there is, in effect, one compulsory course: small group politics. If you do not spend quite a lot of time and effort on that, other people make decisions for you. Small group politics is a useful skill, but not one that every child should devote the equivalent of a full year course every year to.

Better than democratic government is competitive dictatorship, the way we run restaurants and hotels. I have no vote on what is on the menu but an absolute vote on whether I eat there. My preferred model for a school would combine the freedom of unschooling with a conventional proprietary structure, with several such schools in the neighborhood. Since unschooling is age mixed and student driven, it works even for very small schools, with home unschooling as the limiting case, so it should be possible for an urban population to support a variety of unschooling schools.

Conclusion

People vary a lot. I expect there are families that would do a bad job of home schooling and kids who would learn more in a school, also kids who would learn more with the conventional approach, at home or at school, than with unschooling. But for many kids and many parents, both home schooling and unschooling work better than the alternatives.

Unschooling for Grownups

Wandering around the web, I came across a forum, I think for law students, on which someone mentioned my *Law's Order* and commented on how much he had liked it — the sort of thing an author likes to see. Like my earlier *Hidden Order*, the book was intended to fill two different roles, to be usable as a textbook but also to appeal to the proverbial intelligent layman who would like to learn a subject by reading an entertaining and educational book about it. One of my models was *The Selfish Gene*. Another example would be the Feynman lectures.¹⁵ Textbooks, in contrast, are often boring, in part perhaps because they are selected by the professor who assigns them not the students who read them. Some have the reputation of being seriously dumbed down in intellectual level while unusably broad in coverage, hence a poor education even for those who do their best to read them.

¹⁴ My daughter Rebecca gave her view of the problem in a [comment](#) on one of my blog posts.

¹⁵ A commenter writes “As an example, I'd actually use a different Feynman book. *QED: The Strange Theory of Light and Matter*. I don't know how often it's used as a textbook, although that's where I was assigned to read it, and it's the cleanest, clearest, most enjoyable treatment of a subject that's really hard to understand that I've found.”

There is an increasingly widespread perception that the current model of higher education works badly. In large part, it consists of young adults spending four years partying and socializing while pretending to acquire the sort of education that was a social or professional requirement for a small part of the population a century or so ago. There is evidence that a large fraction of those who go to college for four years learn almost nothing of what they are in theory being taught,¹⁶ a result unlikely to surprise any professor who has taught a large required course in his field and observed how many of those taking it are trying to memorize enough to pass the exams before going back to doing something they actually want to do. And it is very expensive, especially at the high end, where "high" is more a description of the status of the school and the ability of the students than of the fraction of them who are there mainly to learn what is being taught.

That suggests the possibility of a more attractive model, in which young adults get on with their lives while educating themselves in whatever subjects are of interest to them in a less formal framework. That could mean working, it could mean getting married and rearing children, for those with a little inherited money and simple tastes it could mean trying to write novels, or do volunteer work, or engage in some other activity that they find a satisfactory way of spending their time. It could even mean a life centered on parties and socializing, supported by parents or whatever minimal investment of paid labor it requires, just done outside of the expensive framework of college or university.

And meanwhile they could be getting educated by reading books, using educational software, taking webbed courses, interacting with people online, a higher-ed version of unschooling. It is how I got quite a lot of my education — I ended up teaching at the graduate level in two different fields, law and economics, in neither of which I had ever taken a course for credit.

One commenter pointed out practical problems with getting your education outside of school, given the current regulatory framework:

If you serve in the military, you get great educational benefits, but they can only be used in a conventional school.

You need to attend a conventional school for licensing, from HVAC, plumbing,¹⁷ and electrical work to medicine, law and nursing. You can't just learn the stuff and pass an exam. Indeed, if you spend 20 years teaching ed classes in college, you will have to go back to school and take those same classes before you are qualified to teach in public high school.

Companies offer their workers educational benefits, which are tax deductible, but only for conventional education.

Feds offer tax credits for education, but only for conventional schools.

But, from another commenter:

Role-playing games have contributed a lot to my education in history. Way back in the 1970s, when I was playing Dungeons and Dragons out of the little tan books, I became

¹⁶ For evidence, see Bryan Caplan, *The Case Against Education: Why the Education System Is a Waste of Time and Money*.

¹⁷ A plumber I know online tells me that the requirements for union apprenticeship in his field vary from place to place, do not routinely require a college degree nor always a high school degree.

curious about what things cost and how prices of equipment were figured, and so I started reading medieval economic history. And from that I began to gain a notion of what real medieval economies were like. And that led me on to history of science, history of technology, economic history generally, legal history, and military history . . . and the sort of general history that tries to take all those into account. I've done even more of it since I started writing books for Steve Jackson Games; my current work on GURPS Low-Tech has had me reading recent historical studies of catapults, warhorses, boats, non-Western firearms, camels, and several other topics. I like to think I've gotten a better sense for how differently historical societies worked. . . .

Which suggests that how much of a problem it is to make use of informal education may largely depend on what sort of work you end up doing.

Postscript Concerning Saint Olaf College

Saint Olaf was the only school our daughter got accepted to where she did not have the advantage of a family connection through parent or grandparent. It was also the one school that appeared to take a positive view of home schooled students. After our daughter visited there, she got an email telling her that while the application deadline was not for a while there was an earlier deadline for scholarship applications, and they had found that home schooled students were sometimes very well qualified. She applied, was accepted and offered a scholarship.

I have a theory of why.

Saint Olaf is one of two high end liberal arts colleges that offer professional level training in music. The other, Oberlin, is somewhat higher rated and more prestigious. As best we could judge — my wife, our daughter, her parents and one of her siblings all went to it at different dates over the past seventy plus years — it has been slowly declining. That provides an opportunity for St. Olaf.

Also a problem. Top schools have a significant incumbency advantage, creating a problem for a school that wants to break into their ranks: Good students want to go to a good school and a large part of what makes a school good is that good students go to it. Spotting the high quality home schooled students that other schools were missing was a way in which St. Olaf could solve that problem, with luck eventually replace Oberlin as the first choice of students who wanted to combine a college education with high end musical training. Our daughter ended up choosing Oberlin but that, judged *ex post*, was probably a mistake.

A similar problem exists for a university that wants to break into the top ranks, defined this time not by students but by faculty. High end faculty want to be at a school with other high end faculty, which makes it hard for a school that wants to move up to attract them. One solution, the one I observed at the beginning of my career as an economist, is to find some niche that nobody else has noticed and specialize in that. If there are only ten economists who want to use economics to understand political institutions and you can attract a few of the best ones, say Jim Buchanan and Gordon Tullock,