

The Value of Negative Learning (#)

The Value of Negative Learning How Traditional Education Can Produce Nontraditional Educators

By Alfie Kohn

I recently spent a delightful few hours devouring 27 autobiographical essays written by alternative educators from around the world. Collectively, these people had founded schools, magazines, and entire movements, helping to promote all manner of nontraditional learning. What fascinated me was that only one of them had attended an alternative school himself. All the others had somehow become committed to a progressive, democratic, or child-centered approach in spite of having experienced something very different as a student. Or *because of* having experienced something very different as a student. When we stop to think about what we were made to do in school, we may recall grumbling about all the stuff that was clearly pointless – or worse. But at the same time, being children, we tended to accept it all as so many facts of life: the schedule, the rules, the curriculum, the adults who were downright mean. We may not have liked it, just as we didn't much care for unpleasant weather, but hey, whatcha gonna do?

What's far more discouraging is that, even as adults, many people never manage to acquire a sense of perspective, a recognition that Things Could Have Been Otherwise, along with the attendant outrage – or at least indignation. They never correct that child's posture of passive acceptance, never come to see school policies as contingent, man-made, opposable. It doesn't occur to them to question the premise that when kids do something bad, something bad must be done to them. They never think to ask whether it's necessary to make children begin a second shift of working on academic tasks once they get home from a full day in school. They take on faith that a child's learning must be reduced to a letter or number rating, and that most classroom time should be spent listening instead of doing.

In fact, lots of people grow up and subject their own children to the same kind of schooling that they themselves barely endured. Some of these parents do so with enthusiasm (and flash cards), which is alarming; others just resign themselves to the inevitability of watching their children act out an excruciating slow-motion exercise in *déjà vu*, which is even worse. Apparently their mantra is: "If it was bad enough for me, it's bad enough for my kids."

So how is it that some folks emerge with an understanding that traditional education is unhealthy for children and other living things, *and* with some insight about why that's true (and what might make more sense instead), *and* with a commitment to show the rest of us a better way? How did they get here from there?

I suspect the key is a phenomenon that might be called "negative learning," in which people regard an unfortunate situation as a chance to figure out what *not* to do. They sit in awful classrooms and pay careful attention because they know they're being exposed to an enormously useful anti-model. They say to themselves, "Here is someone who has a lot to teach me about how not to treat children." Some people perfect this art of negative learning while they're still in those environments; others do it retrospectively, questioning what was done to them earlier even if they never thought – or were unable – to do so before. Some people do it on their own; others need someone to lend them the lens that will allow them to look at things that way.

Of course, a mind-numbing, spirit-killing school experience doesn't reliably launch people into self-actualization, intellectual curiosity, or a career in alternative education. If it did, we'd want everyone to live through that.

Nontraditional educators had to beat the odds, and they've set themselves the task of improving those odds for other children, creating places where the learning doesn't have to be by negative example.

I want new teachers to see progressive education at its best. I want them to spend as much time as possible in a place where they can watch seasoned educators work *with* children rather than doing things *to* them, helping those children to make sense of ideas and create opportunities to discover answers to their own questions, striving to shield them from stultifying mandates handed down from on high. It's hard enough to walk into a classroom on wobbly legs and face a roomful of students for the first time; if at all possible, you want to have had a few caring role models who take intellectual inquiry – and kids – seriously.

But if apprentice teachers find themselves instead in a place where test scores drive the instruction and students are essentially bullied into doing whatever they're told, then it helps to be able to think, "What a memorable display of lousy pedagogy and disrespect for children! I need to take careful notes so, when it's my turn, I can do *exactly the opposite*."

They'll need plenty of help, of course: People can't just will themselves into being proficient progressive teachers. Still, construing a bad classroom as an opportunity for negative learning may jump-start the process, and the same trick can help people who are forced to deal with autocratic administrators, arrogant advisors, or even abusive parents.

How do some among us manage to perform this heuristic alchemy, adopting a constructive mental set even though others who are similarly situated end up just feeling lousy about themselves and about education? My hunch is that it reflects a confluence of environment and personality. Maybe the environment has to be really dreadful, as opposed to merely dull – but at the same time must include a glimpse of something better so it's clear what's missing. People need to know from experience that schools or teachers or families don't *have* to be like this.

The personality part, meanwhile, probably should include equal measures of assertiveness (including a contrarian spirit and a dash of up-yours rebelliousness) and empathy. The contribution of the former is obvious, but the latter is no less important. Some people suffer through the indignity or even brutality of being a newbie somewhere – a fraternity, a medical residency, whatever – and then, once they've attained a little seniority, turn around and abuse the new arrivals. They may derive a certain satisfaction from watching others suffer. They may even convince themselves that having been treated like dirt was somehow good for them. (Beware of anyone who rationalizes and reproduces emotional violence with phrases like "character building" or "tough love.")

But other people – the ones we're looking for – are those who say, "I want to work to change this system so others will be spared what was done to me." They have the compassion and the courage to shake up the status quo and denounce cruel traditions. They've mastered the art of negative learning and developed a commitment to making the world, or at least whatever part of it they come to inhabit, a better place than it was before they got there.

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