

Experience is the wellspring of all education

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Page: A15

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The rhetorical question was a device frequently used by my father when imparting life lessons. A mainstay was, "Have you had the same experience 13 times or have you had 13 different experiences?"

From September to June schools repeatedly serve up the same warmed-over experiences. Most are repeat episodes with new challenges being at best small additions to what went before. Summer, by contrast, is so teeming with opportunities, each one different from the next, that if kids had summer all year, their education would be complete.

Art, music, science and sports camps abound, many with their own sub-specialties (structural engineering anyone?). There are back-to-nature and in-the-city activities, pricey programs and nominal fee ones. Shakespeare workshops, rock band camps, chef schools and rock climbing are on offer. One Ontario organization alone lists close to 300 day and residential camps, with over 130 able to accommodate kids with special needs. And, teachers and counselors -- freed from the arbitrary certification and union rules that restrict formal schooling -- run the gamut from young to old, part-time to professional, beginner to seasoned.

Kids seem more able in these programs to learn the very skills schools are often unsuccessful at teaching. A stand-out this year was the math skills my 13 year old picked up while taking a game-programming course. More significantly, he acquired an understanding of why math is actually useful, an attitude rarely acquired through conventional schooling.

Summer is also a time to learn through work. The standards --dog walking and house sitting for younger kids, retail and construction for older ones -- are joined by numerous chances for kids to sharpen their entrepreneurial skills.

In our neighbourhood, teen music buskers have joined the venerable lemonade stand. I know one young entrepreneur whose business selling jewellery at village fairs has seen year-over-year profit increases since she started at age eleven. Then there is the 16-year-old aspiring engineer I heard of who is designing a new and improved floating lake raft (patent possibilities?). And, my own son had the opportunity to broker the sale of a neighbour's extensive comic book collection.

These are hands-on learning experiences which can occur only during the freer days that summer affords.

And, experiences do matter -- they are the wellspring of all education. It is strange then that we think the micro and macro goals of schooling -- literacy development and preparing citizens for the "creative economy" -- can be achieved by limiting kids' experiences to those that happen between the schoolhouse walls.

Literacy depends on the visceral knowledge that only real life can deliver, something I and my fellow teachers learned first-hand while taking a course in which we were given a passage to read and explain. While written in perfect English, it referred to the village activities of an obscure African tribe: With no first-hand experience of its context or content, we had no clue what it meant, even though we could technically "read" the words. This is why the push to earlier and year-round schooling is dangerously counterproductive. What young people need -- particularly disadvantaged ones -- is to gain knowledge and experience through interaction with the world-at-large, not more classroom time.

As for the "creative economy," fruitful innovation comes about through the clash and overlap of ideas, attitudes and experimentation gleaned from living one's life broadly. It is through the cross-pollination of one experience with another that creativity is born, something that simply doesn't occur in our status-quo September to June schools.

This wealth of learning, this all-encompassing exposure to new skills, knowledge and mentors, is only available to young people for a fraction of the year because of our unhealthy lack of educational choice. While choice is most often championed on the grounds that market forces will cause the cream to rise to the top (true, as I have seen summer programs come and go if parents didn't subscribe to them), the more crucial argument for choice is the control and agency it bestows upon the learner.

In his iconic 1971 book, *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich wrote that learning occurs only when the "responsibility-to-educate" is given directly to the individual. The

American writer Daniel H. Pink calls this "educational free agency" -- each person is free to make their own learning contracts on a self-defined, need-to-know basis.

After doing the math, it is obvious that a lot more education could be had for a lot less than the average \$9,500 currently allotted per child per school year. If each young person became their own learning entrepreneur, engaged and enterprising about their education -- something we allow them to do all summer and something that a simple redirection of funds to the learner would achieve-- we would finally have an education system that worked and worked well.

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