

# **Unschooling Media: Participatory Practices among Progressive Homeschoolers**

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Master's of Science Thesis in Comparative Media Studies  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
May 12, 2006

## Table of Contents

- p.3—Thanks
  
- p.4—Introduction:
  - The Road Not Often Taken
  
- p.16—History/Historiography:
  - The Cultural Construction of Media & Technology in a Grassroots Subculture
  
- p.53—Five Unschooling Case Studies:
  - p.54—Introduction to Five Unschooling Case Studies
  - p.67—Case Study #1
    - Peter’s Opera Record:
      - Haphazardly Accessing the Cabinet of Curiosity*
  - p.80—Case Study #2
    - Eli’s Coop:
      - A Civil War Role-play*
  - p.98—Case Study #3
    - Carsie’s Network:
      - Connecting a Geographically Dispersed Population*
  - p.124—Case Study #4
    - Sandra Unschools the Researcher:
      - Legitimizing IM & TV*
  - p.146—Case Study #5
    - DIY Subculture:
      - Zines & Collective Participation*
  
- p.171—My Methodology:
  - Unschooling the Thesis
  
- p.187—Conclusion:
  - Learning with Participatory Practices  
in Self-Making & Subcultural Transformation
  
- p.196—Appendix:
  - Del.icio.us tags
  - Image List
  
- p.199—Bibliography
  - Websites & Community Resources
  - Media References
  - Interviews & Fieldwork

**Thanks to:**

My thesis committee: Henry Jenkins, thesis advisor (Comparative Media Studies);

Kirsten Olson, thesis reader (Wheaton College); and David Cavallo, thesis reader (MIT Media Lab, Future of Learning Group).

Catalina Laserna, my anthropology mentor at Harvard.

Kurt Fendt, William Uricchio and Andrea Taylor for their help early on. Also Janet Sonenberg, Fred Turner, Mitchell Stevens, Patricia Graham, Judy Norsigian, Helen Haste, Amy Richards, Joyce and Mel King.

All CMSers: '05, '06, '07.

My roommates: Mara Dowdall and Dave Barbaree.

My family: Ed, Judy, Nick, Kim, and Sabina, Allegra and Jeff, and Julia.

All the Informants: Eva Kendrick; Pat Farenga; Carsie Blanton; Rob & Lizette Greco; Beatrice Ekwa Ekoko & Randy Kay; Sage, Garrett, Bella, & Emily Adderley; Matt Hern, Selena, Sadie, Daisy Couture, Ashley Doman, & The Purple Thistle punks; Susannah Sheffer & Aaron Falbel; Sue, Marc, Eli & their Jamaica Plain coop; Mary, Mike, Peter, & Richard X; Sandra, Kirby, Marty, & Holly Dodd; Ken Danford, Vlad Blanton, Sphennings Stephens, & North Star; Jason Marsh; Clayton & Vernon Dewey, Danilo X; David Friedman & his family; Denise Perri; Derek Davis; Dan Roy & his mom; Gabrielle Anderson; Heather Cushman-Dowdee & her family; Jeremy Merritt & his family; Jon Shemitz; Joyce & Kathryn Fetteroll; Katie Shufflin-Febuary & Evyn; Katrina Cornell; Loretta Heuer; Nika & Ed Boyce; Roland Legiardi-Laura; Tiara Shafiq; Doug Healy; Billy Upski Wimsatt; & Grace Llewellyn.

## Introduction: The Road Not Often Taken

*“From the time I was six, the question was not when does school open, but what, if anything, is to be done about school.”—Margaret Mead, in her autobiography<sup>1</sup>*

Rehoboth, the name of my hometown in southern Massachusetts, comes from the Hebrew word for “crossroads.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed there’s not much in this rural town besides Route 44 and Route 118, with smatterings of horse farms and single-family homes. These two blue highways intersect at the town’s only stoplight. A sign stands at this intersection at the center of town, in front of the Cumberland Farms convenience store, across the street from the new Dunkin Donuts. It reads:



*Rehoboth central (photo courtesy Rad Rigsby)*

*Rehoboth, MA: Birthplace of Public Education in North America.<sup>3</sup>*

I’m a product of these schools, but in this thesis I explore the road not often traveled in education: unschooling, a type of homeschooling with unstructured, child-directed

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<sup>1</sup> p.72, Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*.

<sup>2</sup> My parents were often half bucking the trend, in my mind especially during the 60s and 70s. Right at the time of Janis Joplin and Led Zeppelin, they were getting really into Classical music. In 1983, my parents moved the family from Providence, RI, just over the border to a 60-acre farm in Rehoboth, MA. Just when the utopian dreams of the Left were giving up on the whole back-to-the-land idea, we started raising our own beef, harvesting hay and chopping firewood. When feminists were taking a stand by getting jobs outside the home, my mother chose to be a stay-at-home mom. And yet she defied stereotypes. My mom relished driving a tractor around, spreading manure and, in general, bending the landscape to her will.

<sup>3</sup> And as I look back on my own schooling, I must also acknowledge the idyllic childhood that I was so lucky to have. My dad was a lawyer at a large law firm. Although he could have probably sent my three siblings and me to private school, because of his thrifty nature and civic attitude, we were sent to public school. When I got to Harvard and encountered the prep school kids, I felt the meaning of this difference. As I write this thesis, I consider whether I would unschool my kids if/when I have them. If there’s one thing I feel conflicted about in terms of unschooling, it’s the realization of the mixing of people from different socio-economic backgrounds that takes place in public school. Unschoolers argue that they strive for this in an intentional and more authentic way. But honestly, I’m not so sure how often this actually happens.

learning.<sup>4</sup> Through an examination of the attitudes, beliefs and practices related to media and technology in the unschooling subculture, I come to a definition of participatory media.<sup>5</sup>

Unschoolers engage in participatory practices: they play active roles in creating meaning through media and technology. In this thesis, I theorize the participatory nature of these practices, such as finding/reading/consuming texts, social/experiential learning, building/using social networks, radical linguistic interactions, and producing/contemplating media artifacts. The unschoolers generate meaning on both the personal and cultural levels. Thus unschoolers collectively generate subcultural identity over time. These practices support and reinforce each other, sometimes contradict each other, revealing a subculture in the dynamic process of defining itself.

Since not many people know about unschooling (at the time this thesis was written in 2006), the chapter *History/Historiography: The Cultural Construction of Media & Technology in a Grassroots Subculture* will provide context and answer basic orienting questions for my readers. I explain this term “unschooling” and its semiotic context in the *History/Historiography* chapter of this thesis, where I introduce unschooling and its emergence in the late 1960s liberal culture.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, I sketch

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<sup>4</sup> I want to try to give proper attention to the unschooling subculture. For the most part, I set aside the Christian homeschoolers vs. the unschooling comparisons because the contradictions within unschooling were complicated enough for the space of this thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Let me define what I mean by “practice.” It is not simply a preparation, not just an action attempted and completed, but implicit in my use of the word practice is a sense of *becoming*. It’s inextricable from the everyday, in admission that we never possess knowledge in some sort of complete way, leading to a finality. Illich and other de-/unschoolers critiqued the model of education that conceptualized knowledge as a commodity to be possessed. The inherently social meaning of practice in this thesis is similar to Seely Brown’s: “we intend the term ‘practice’ to refer to the coordinated activities of individuals and groups in doing their ‘real work’ as it is informed by a particular organizational or group context” (p.386-7, Cook and Seely Brown, “Bridging Epistemologies: The Generative Dance between organizational Knowledge and Organizational Knowing”). In relation to unschooling, “real work” can be thought of as learning in everyday life.

<sup>6</sup> Today the terms “counterculture” and “hippy” seem too superficial—and too complex at the same time. For me these words have been a shorthand term for late 60s through 70s bellbottoms I’ve sometimes found in thrift stores, believing in peace and love like The Beatles, and the crazy dancing I’ve seen in film footage of huge outdoor rock concerts. But

how unschoolers have constructed the narrative of their cultural history over the past forty years.

In the chapter *My Methodology: Unschooling the Thesis*, I discuss the reasons for and ramifications of my research methods. Coming, as I do, from an eclectic academic background, I use a variety of qualitative methods in this thesis. I believe in *showing not telling*, perhaps a remnant from my documentary filmmaking background. You will read many anecdotes and see photos from my informants. In my *Methodology* chapter I explain how I gained access to these unschoolers, how I interviewed them, and what complications occurred in doing so.

In the *Introduction to Five Unschooling Case Studies*, I anticipate the normative questions of my readers and try to familiarize my readers with the mind-set of the subculture. Throughout the interpretive analysis of these case studies, I harness theory to analyze my thick description and to gain insight into the practices of this subculture. I see theory as useful in two major capacities. First, it helps to locate the importance of this study. Second, it acts as a lens, guiding insight into the subculture.

I've wielded a number of theoretical tools to navigate through my research on unschooling. For the sake of simplicity, I will briefly explain my approach: my work sits at the intersection of anthropology, education and comparative media studies. My initial interest in an anthropological approach stemmed from a gut feeling about the importance of interviews with and observation of the people who actually live what I theorize. I feel an affinity with anthropologists who write about literacies and situated learning, namely

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now after having researched the period, I've come to realize that "hippy" and "counterculture" swirl together contradictions of lived experience and mediated representations: hedonism but also back-to-the-land spartanism, pioneering American activism but also misguided idealism. Many people associate hippies with drug use and laziness, a stereotype that the unschoolers I've interviewed especially resist. In fact, unschoolers underscore a healthy, self-motivated lifestyle and a philosophy of personal responsibility.

the work of Lave and Wenger, Street, and Brice Heath. “Research into ‘vernacular’ literacies within modern urban settings has begun to show the richness and diversity of literacy practices and meaning despite the pressures for uniformity exerted by the nation state and modern educational systems.”<sup>7</sup> Their studies converge with educational writings about informal learning, such as James Paul Gee, David Buckingham, Julian Sefton-Green, and what I now see as the research space opening up in distanced learning and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills—a rethinking of literacies in light of the transformations currently taking place with digital technology.

In terms of educational theory, I do not attempt to systematically compare and contrast schooling vs. unschooling in this thesis. Rather, I examine learning happening outside of the context of schooling within a subculture with its own educational—or rather philosophical—tradition, very much in opposition to the institution of school. I’m not claiming that the practices analyzed in this thesis are mutually exclusive from practices taking place in some schools or even in schoolchildren’s lives in after-school programs or in the home. Rather, I’m claiming that this particular subculture engages in a conscious questioning and construction of legitimizing practices of learning in everyday life. The focus of this thesis is the self-reflexivity of these participatory practices on the individual, group and subcultural levels. Within the constraints of this Master’s thesis, I lay out some key ideas from within the context of this subculture, in full hopes that future work could attempt a more exacting analysis of the differences and similarities between school, the informal practices of schoolchildren after-school and in the home, and unschooling. In this way, I use an anthropological approach to get at what has been called

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<sup>7</sup> p.1, ed. Brian Street, *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*.

“naturalized” learning, while fully aware that unschooling is just one way to get at naturalized learning.<sup>8</sup>

In this thesis, I try to stay “in the moment”—the flow of everyday practice—while describing it, a slippery thing to do. My analysis, I hope, lends insight, yet doesn’t interrupt engagement. For now, let me briefly lay out some of the core elements of theory that guides this work. Throughout this thesis I refer to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Their book draws on case studies of Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors from Africa, naval quartermasters, meat cutters, and non-drinking alcoholics. Through these case studies, Lave and Wenger lay out a theory of social learning within communities of practice through apprenticeship models, rather than school. Their work has been very useful for me as a model for thinking about the social context of learning in everyday life. However, there is little analysis of media and technology within their book, and in fact they point this out as an area for further study: “The artifacts employed in ongoing practice, the technology of practice, provide a good arena in which to discuss the problem of access to understanding. In general, social scientists who concern themselves with learning treat technology as a given and are not analytic about its interrelations with other

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<sup>8</sup> I’m interested in the way anthropology is opening up *literacy to literacies*. Take, for example, Miriam Camitta’s chapter in *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*, edited by Brian Street, “Vernacular Writing: Varieties of Literacy among Philadelphia High School Students.” She re-focuses the lens of educational research on the informal writing students do between classes and on their own time. She analyzes this writing as process and performance, connecting orality to face-to-face collaboration with one’s audience. This intimacy, rather than the “fictionalized audience,” gets to what researchers like Camitta and the radical theorists of the early 1970s hold up as a more “naturalistic” setting (p.230-1). “These studies have in effect relocated the gaze of the researcher from classroom application of ideal standards of written literacy to everyday, ordinary contexts of use...Ethnographic studies of writing contextualize its practice in communities, and conceptualize it as both channel and text of cultural expression”(p.232). While the school where Camitta taught and researched is similar to A.S. Neill’s Summerhill or other Free Schools, it’s a school nonetheless. My thesis re-focuses the lens on a subculture which has completely embraced this “naturalized” setting to the degree where the institutionalized setting has receded to just an oppositional reference point. I also see text—and other media forms and ways of interacting with information—as both “channel and text of cultural expression,” as Camitta put it.



aspects of a community of practice.”<sup>9</sup> This is exactly the muddy patch that I try to navigate. In this thesis, I write about not just the problematics of children learning with media and technology, but also those of the parents, and further, how their differences in access or willingness to engage with media and technology effects their learning, relationships, and their conceptions of the subculture of unschooling. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger continue: “Becoming a full participant certainly includes engaging with the technologies of everyday practice, as well as participating in the social relations, production processes, and other activities of communities of practice. But the understanding to be gained from engagement with technology can be extremely varied depending of the form of participation enabled by its use. Participation involving technology is especially significant because the artifacts used within a cultural practice carry a substantial portion of that practice’s heritage.”<sup>10</sup> My case studies provide a look into a community of practice that is constantly negotiating the meaning of its own heritage, philosophy and personal application in everyday life.

Why comparative media studies? In a sense, this thesis stands as an analysis of a subculture’s production, consumption and distribution of grassroots media. On the one hand, I use media objects for textual readings, but I also strive for an understanding of unschoolers’ attitudes, beliefs and practices pertaining to media and technology as expressions of subcultural identity. In terms of CMS works that having informed my thinking about media systems and culture, there are simply too many to list. Diane Zimmerman Umble’s piece,  *Holding the Line: The Telephone in the Old Order Mennonite and Amish Life*, inspired my approach early on: the technology debate within

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<sup>9</sup> p.101, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

unschooling exemplifies the subcultural negotiations that go on around rupture points of technological and media practices. I use CMS when examining the subcultures' audience-participants, with fan studies and reception theory. This approach has its own academic tradition of representing voices that aren't normally heard. With a CMS approach, I attempt to construct a representation of unschooling through the manifestation of media objects and a concretization of more abstract ideas through the unschoolers' own descriptions of their media and technology practices.

Standing as I do at this intersection of anthropology, education, and CMS, I see a complex landscape before me. However, I feel this complexity most accurately respects my informants, whose lived experiences make up the content of the *Five Unschooling Case Studies*. I've written this thesis about real people and how they consciously decide to live their lives. Margaret Mead asked, "What, if anything, is to be done about school?"<sup>11</sup> I consider this question elemental to our American way of life, yet it so rarely gets answered outside of the realm of the habitual and the status quo. My guiding question is: *Why and how do we learn with media—and learn with the sort of joy that brings us close to our essential humanity?* I admire my informants' courage in questioning what most of us take for granted, while internal conflicts about media and technology bring even more questions about unschooling to my mind. I've tried to do justice to the complexity of their answer: unschooling.

Mead's query is the very same question unschoolers ask themselves while standing at the crossroads of education. My interest in this group hinges on their ambition to take that sharp turn and actually practice their utopian vision. While these unschoolers set out on their way, I document their path, set it into the context of the

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<sup>11</sup> p.72, Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*.

larger American landscape. Academic work on unschooling is practically nonexistent. For her Harvard Graduate School of Education dissertation, Kirsten Olson, one of my thesis committee members, did a literary analysis of six original unschoolers and deschoolers of the 60s and 70s, titled *To be Brave and Subversive Human Beings: the Deschoolers of the 1960's*. Mitchell Steven's book *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement* was very useful to me in that he was able to compare and contrast the sociological, organizational makeup of religious homeschoolers and those who don't homeschool for religious reasons—whom he calls “inclusives.”<sup>12</sup> *Free Schools, Free People: Education and Democracy after the 1960s* by Ron Miller was helpful in its analysis of Free Schools, a precursor to the unschooling movement. There are other studies of homeschooling from the education field, such as Eva Jin Chen's *Computer Use in Home School Families*. However, none of them, besides Olson's, focus on unschooling. To my knowledge, no academic cultural/media studies work on unschoolers exists at the time of writing this thesis. If my analysis errs on the side of covering too much ground, it may be that I tried to adequately represent an incredibly diverse subculture—one about which little academic work has been written.

Indeed, unschoolers do not travel in lockstep down their path. My main contribution then, is in the *Five Unschooling Case Studies* chapter of this thesis. I have tried to paint a vivid picture of the diversity and range of media practices in unschooling. Part of my work in this thesis is to make the path of unschooling more familiar to an audience for whom unschooling might seem strange at first. I see the media objects and technology as a commonality between the unschoolers and the mainstream; the unschoolers' media practices and the meaning they generate may differ from those of the

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<sup>12</sup> p.20, Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.

mainstream. In this way, the *Five Unschooling Case Studies* offer insights into the cultural construction of learning with media and technology in this particular subculture.

In some instances, my findings are generalizable to the mainstream.

Unschoolers often refer to learning as “natural,” “organic,” “instinctive.”

Learning in the unschooling subculture is so embedded in the flow of everyday life that it becomes invisible, naturalized. Unschooling often happens on the level of intuition:

*“Our feeling on homeschooling is an instinctive feeling, a feeling that is based in our belief that the human spirit is inherently curious and interested. Our actions are not derived from any intellectual theory but based on our own love of music and books and nature and the world. It is these loves that we want to share with our kids. And we want to share them in a way so that they will love them too and want to spread those interests with others.”—Mary, unschooling mother<sup>13</sup>*

Mary and the other unschoolers featured in this thesis do not learn according to some external methodology. And yet, my academic project strives to reveal what makes this organic feeling possible. This is important, because if unschoolers are right—if we can do this sort of joyful learning instead of school—then it begs a question: what is it about these individuals, these families, these social groups, networks and subculture that makes unschooling possible? Bruno Latour wrote about scientific inscriptions, “They are both material and mundane, since they are so practical, so modest, so pervasive, so close to the hands and the eye that they escape attention.”<sup>14</sup> With the media practices of unschoolers, what comes naturally for them may not seem natural for others. At the time of writing this thesis, I shock and confuse mainstream people when I tell them about my research topic.<sup>15</sup> What follows in this thesis is my attempt to show which practices unschoolers

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<sup>13</sup> Mary’s April 18, 2006 email to me.

<sup>14</sup> p.3, Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands” in *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*.

<sup>15</sup> I use the word “mainstream” somewhat uncomfortably. I simply mean people who go to school or have gone to school and who never questioned its existence. I’m reminded of the Society for Creative Anachronism’s use of the word “mundane” for non-members (<http://www.sca.org/>). This thesis is meant to serve as a bridge between the two

value as “instinctual” and why— for we should not take instincts for granted. Are there ways to take insights from unschoolers’ participatory practices in order to reinvent school on a fundamental level—by rethinking compulsion, standardization, rote memorization, for instance? And though I realize unschoolers do not follow a prescribed academic theory, and while I feel somewhat uneasy about theorizing unschooling, I feel it is important to analyze unschooling in terms of not just abstractions, but through a qualitative return to the everyday. Writing a thesis is no doubt a schoolish thing to do, but at least this one happened through collaboration with my unschooling informants.

Where along this road not often taken, did I first meet an unschooler? It’s difficult to remember, but I think my older brother was hired to paint the Kendricks’ big, Victorian house purple about twenty years ago. The Kendricks family had three sisters, all with long tresses of blonde hair. The youngest sister was a bit older than me and greeted me enthusiastically at their door the day I arrived play. I remember they were the first girls I’d met who read comicbooks. They were into *Elfquest*, and even in 1985 as a seven year old, I could sense the Kendricks’ aesthetic. Something about the way they looked, the way it felt to move around in their eclectic house, and the fact that they made claymation movies instead of going to school—something about them hung together and transported them to another realm.

Now at MIT, I find myself fascinated by participatory media and unschooling. I have frustrations about a world peace that never happened and public schools like the one I attended growing worse and worse...the high price of organic food. And so it makes sense that I would want to research the grassroots media of the unschooling movement.

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groups, instead of the frustrated huffs of “you wouldn’t understand” which might normally linger in the space in between.

In the first issue of John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling* magazine, the man who coined the word "unschooling," wrote that "important and lasting social change always comes slowly, and only when people change their lives, not just their political beliefs or parties."<sup>16</sup> Grassroots means investment in a cause on the level of lifestyle change, and through that magazine, pieced together as it was without a real distinction between readers' letters and editors' articles, one can hear the collective voice of people as they make the turn down that unknown path.

I did a search for the Kendricks on the web and located Eva, who had once been the little blonde girl I'd played with in the purple house. I contacted her and explained whom I was and that I was researching unschooling. Conveniently enough, Eva studies down the street from me in Cambridge. She's a composer of experimental music at the Longy School of Music. We got together at a café in Harvard Square, and Eva—after twenty years, now a very tall blonde woman—describes the musical theater piece she's working on. It will be a sort of opera, but with a mystery genre plot and multi-media staging. She envisions singers moving through a stage with projected images, conjuring the architecture of the characters' half-remembered childhood spaces. Eva also brought a collection of pieces for me to scan for this thesis: colored pencil drawings, comicbooks and essays she and her two sisters had made while growing up.<sup>17</sup>

Looking at Eva's childhood drawings, I was brought back to the crossroads of my hometown, to where I went to school, to Eva's purple house. In my attempts to understand unschooling, standing at this academic crossroads, I've turned to what

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<sup>16</sup> p.3, ed John Holt, *Growing Without Schooling: A Record of a Grassroots Movement*. The magazine was founded in 1977 and stopped being published in 2001, sixteen years after its founder John Holt died. For a closing letter, see <http://www.holtgws.com/growingwithoutsc.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Her older sister Celia now works as an animator for *The Simpsons*.

anthropologists refer to as *making the natural strange, and familiarizing myself with the strange until it's natural*. I use this anthropological approach, then, to reveal the naturalized learning practices specifically related to the production, consumption and distribution of DIY media. Media practices are a way for me to point to something—that, there, tell me a story about that zine, what's happening in this photograph, what happened with the Civil War role-play, how do you feel about making rules about watching television, or how did your child learn to read through his love of opera?

What are the social contexts, the cultural history, the mediated mechanisms through which a paradigm-shift in consciousness occur, which support this “intuitive” learning? If the unschoolers feel this joy, then perhaps through these traces of media and personal stories, we can better understand learning. Perhaps from the unschoolers’ participatory practices, we can learn about the role of media in our everyday lives.



## **History/Historiography: The Cultural Construction of Media & Technology in a Grassroots Subculture**

*“After the advent of printing however, the transmission of written information became more efficient... Gifted students no longer needed to sit at the feet of a given master... Instead they could swiftly achieve mastery on their own, even by sneaking books past their tutors—as did the young would-be astronomer Tycho Brahe. ‘Why should old men be preferred to their juniors now that it is possible for the young by diligent study to acquire the same knowledge?’ asked the author of a fifteenth century outline of history.”—Elizabeth Eisenstein on Tycho Brahe<sup>18</sup>*

The history of unschooling is tied to the development technology, but mostly in the way that unschoolers radically question socio-cultural norms of access to and production of knowledge. Unschooling dissent’s point of entry is the “school[, whose] ...curriculum has been decontextualized—or to use Papert’s phrase, ‘dissociated’—from the stream of life, where, as Wittgenstein has noted, words derived their meaning.”<sup>19</sup> The movement has not been a major success in spawning change in mainstream America’s way of life. But that’s the result of a movement whose philosophy puts the responsibility for one’s life on oneself and whose means of communication have been smaller, deeper, perhaps less trendy.<sup>20</sup> Unschooling is at its heart a quality of life movement, which sprung from the foment of the radical 1960s and 70s. Mainstream people have often asked in reaction to my research topic, *does unschooling work?* If the criterion is happy children who grow into self-motivated people with a love of learning—well then, yes,

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<sup>18</sup> Eisenstein picks up on the *freedom* with which self-motivated individuals use books and indeed often ascribe to the media as inherent. Today Americans often look at the book as outmoded or overly “authored” while turning to the web or other collaborative media for more freedom. The book, as an object, must be purchased and in many cases it is assigned—becoming in effect the “old man.” My thesis will attempt to locate counterculture and unschoolers’ conception of “the Man” in their search for “Freedom” (*The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*).

<sup>19</sup> p.44, Aaron Falbel, *Friskolen 70: an Ethnographically Informed Inquiry into the Social Context of Learning*.

<sup>20</sup> At the end of Aaron Falbel’s article “Learning? Yes, of course. Education? No thanks” in *Growing Without Schooling #92*, he addresses his readers thusly: “If you agree with this statement, or just find it provocative, make copies and discuss it with your family, friends, neighbors, and fellow workers. Send a copy to distant friends and invite them to do the same.” I was struck by the p2p way unschooling messages flow, seeing as how Aaron had photocopied the article and gave it to me when we met (p.14). After I talked to Sue, an unschooling mom, she mailed me a free newspaper sold by unemployed people. It’s called *What’s Up: Bringing Arts & Awareness to the Streets* and there’s an article about Sue’s homeschooling group in the April 2005 issue. “Parents in Jamaica Plain are coming together, pooling resources, and bringing homeschooling out of the living room and into the community”(p.16, “It Takes a Village” by Claire Sternberg).



unschooling does work. In this chapter, I show how the unschoolers' particular historiography helps them do this.

### **An Introduction to the “Rebellious Twin”**

Homeschoolers often use the term “unschooling” to refer to child-directed, de-institutionalized learning. In Google image searching for mainstream visual representations of homeschoolers, I could really only find Spelling Bee winners, which doesn't seem adequate, given the sheer scope of diversity within homeschooling. Mitchell Stevens, a sociologist researching homeschooling in the 1990s, found that “the organizational map was complicated then, but it could appropriately be described as having two sides.”<sup>21</sup> Unschooling stands in contrast in many ways to the present day, American-mainstream conception of homeschooling: many Americans assume that all homeschoolers are fundamentalist Christians. Americans, as Goodman wrote in 1956, “have ceased to be able to imagine alternatives,” and so stretching their imaginations, might envision the living room as a classroom with the parent serving as a teacher, leading class with textbooks, canned curricula and the like.<sup>22</sup> While many Christians and even many non-sectarian homeschoolers in the “other” camp do take this approach, people who self-identify as unschoolers could not be further from this vision. The average unschooled approach to media and technology reflects this difference.

“*How many homeschoolers does it take to screw in a light bulb?*”  
I'm sitting in a café in Amherst, MA with Susannah Sheffer, former editor of *Growing Without Schooling Magazine*, and her husband Aaron Falbel, an author who has written

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<sup>21</sup> p.19, Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.

<sup>22</sup> p.x, Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized Society*. “Canned” is a word that often pops up in unschooling texts. It connotes not just pre-packaged, relatively less wholesome or fresh food, but also the “fakey” canned laughter of television laugh tracks.

on homeschooling, when Susannah tells their homeschooling joke.<sup>23</sup> I eagerly look to Aaron. He pauses for a moment and then delivers the punch line in a mock-scholarly voice:

*“Well, we’re not exactly sure how many homeschoolers. Estimates vary. Depends on the way you count them. The curriculum suppliers have one number...”*

As I chuckled at Susannah and Aaron’s joke, I realized just how apt it was. I’ve found it difficult to categorize the world of progressive homeschooling. Later in this thesis, I will discuss in further depth the linguistic matter of labels and the definitions of certain key terms. For the sake of clarity, however, I will now attempt to delineate the focus of my research: unschoolers mostly identify as liberal, progressive, or radical anarchist in their politics and in their overall lifestyle. I use the term to refer both to the parents and the children. According to a 1995 study by Maralee Mayberry, most homeschooling families have white, middleclass and well-educated parents.<sup>24</sup> In my experience, these families are sensitive people, considerate of the give and take necessary to practice unschooling with one’s children, generous enough to often forego economic gain in order to have a spouse stay at home with the kids or work from home. These families are very diverse in many ways and yet they are united in their love of learning. Whether it’s learning through building and engineering, reading, playing music, researching, dialoguing with others—whatever the hobby, whatever the vocation of the parents (many are teachers or former teachers, by the way), they seek to foster of love of learning in their kids. Unschooling parents see such a thing as love for learning as the fundamental element for deep, meaningful relationship with the world, knowledge, and other people. They also see this love of learning as something natural and true, and yet very fragile and contingent

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<sup>23</sup> Recorded audio interview with Bertozzi, December 15, 2005. Susannah also revised some of the wording of her quotes with me in April 2006.

<sup>24</sup> p.11-12, Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.

upon the right environment and philosophical orientation. Subsequently, metaphor of seeds of learning blossoming and so forth are quite common.

Meanwhile, the tendency for government researchers to deal with the remarkably diverse homeschooling population as one lump sum skews the data toward the religious homeschoolers who make up the majority, whereas unschoolers represent one subset of the minority within homeschooling. Additionally, many families have children younger than “school age” who flow with the unschooling lifestyle of integrated learning. Or what about high school aged kids who “drop out” and don’t fill out homeschooling paperwork with their state, but might consider themselves unschoolers? Indeed, some question the very attempts to statistically analyze their population, on the grounds that they’re just too diverse to parse the information in any meaningful way. Additionally, many unschoolers have a philosophical aversion to assessing people in any sort of “technocratic” way. “Therefore, in order to obtain the most reliable estimate of the number of home-schooled children, whatever one’s definition, survey items must allow respondents to describe their children’s schooling arrangements in some detail. Without such detail, it is difficult to know what estimates of the number and proportion of ‘home-schooled’ children mean.”<sup>25</sup>

Statistical data provided through government mechanisms are further problematized because bureaucratic regulations of homeschooling vary from state to state. Consequently, unschooling remains a somewhat undefined group, even down to the spelling of “homeschooling/home schooling/home-schooling” in the so-called authoritative, quantitative studies. As we shall see, even the nomenclature of “home” in homeschooling has been called into question by “deschoolers” and “unschoolers.” These

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<sup>25</sup> p.54, National Center for Education Statistics, *Issues Related to Estimating the Home-Schooled Population in the United States with National Household Survey Data*.

linguistic and demographic skirmishes at the borders of this subculture reflect the reality of diversity but also ideological differences.

Since the advent of the unschooling movement in the 1970s, the educational practice has gained in population, though it remains suspicious to and misunderstood by the mainstream population.<sup>26</sup> Homeschoolers of all kinds banded together to fight to legalize the practice during the 1980s. Today, homeschooling is legal in all fifty states, though government bureaucratic oversight varies drastically from state to state. In the year 2003, there were about 1.1 million homeschoolers or about 2% of school-aged children.<sup>27</sup> “Unschoolers make up approximately 5 to 10 percent of all home-schoolers...Since 1960, when A.S. Neill published ‘Summerhill,’ a chronicle of life at his ‘free-learning’ British boarding school, and American educational reformer John Holt coined the phrase ‘un-schooling’ in his books of the late 1970s, the philosophy has emerged as the rebellious twin of the home-schooling movement. While paired in many people's minds, the two have distinct agendas and ideologies. ‘It is a distinction that is as old as the home-school movement itself, and is an artifact of the fact the movement grew out of both the alternative school movement of the 1970s and the Christian day school movement,’ explains Mitchell Stevens, professor of humanities and social sciences at New York University, and author of a definitive study of contemporary home-

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<sup>26</sup> In speaking with unschoolers, they tend to be a tad wary of me at first. When they see I'm not interested in stereotyping them but theorizing the way they use media, they were more open to speaking with me. I take it as part of the work of my thesis to present a piece of scholarship that goes beyond preemptive dismissal.

<sup>27</sup> According to a July 2004 Issue brief by the National Center for Educational Statistics a division of the U.S. Department of Education. Quantifying homeschoolers is particularly challenging because of the variations in state procedure that try to keep track of homeschoolers. It's believed that some homeschoolers purposefully try to remain “off the grid” in order to avoid what they see as undue hassling from the government. Researcher Patricia Lines has spent much of her career tracking homeschoolers. “It seems likely that some 10,000 to 15, 000 school-aged children were schooling at home in the early 1970s. By the fall of 1983, this probably grew to include 60,000 to 125,000 children; by the fall of 1985, between 150,000 to 300,000 school-aged children in home schools.” (p.10, ed Van Galen & Pitman, *Home Schooling: Political, Historical and Pedagogical Perspectives*).

schooling.”<sup>28</sup> The Christian fundamentalists’ and, as Stevens refers to them, the *inclusives*’ constructions of learning are quite different. That said, we can by no means assume the *inclusives* to be homogenous.<sup>29</sup> While unschoolers share a philosophy of child-led learning in everyday, variances in media and technology practices exist. This thesis explores why and how these patterns and rifts in media and technology practices within the unschooling subculture came about.

As I’ve been examining the history of unschooling in regards to its grassroots media culture, I’ve come to recognize patterns in media usage, creation, and circulation. Because most unschoolers do not leave school for religious reasons, I have looked to their motivations: bullying, discrimination, disability, gifted, philosophical, and political reasons. In terms of the cultural construction of media consumption and production, it’s been most useful to investigate the philosophical and political reasons for unschooling. Writing on the difference between Christian and what he calls *other* or *inclusive* homeschoolers, Mitchell Stevens puts forth an interesting guiding metaphor: Heaven & Earth. Martha, a Christian homeschooler, put it to him this way:

*“It’s the Lord that gives us the strength to do it [homeschooling]. And I think that those people who are doing it who are not Christians must be special kinds of people, there must be something inside them that gives them the motivation to do this.”—Martha<sup>30</sup>*

Stevens’ research presents how cultural constructions of childhood and indeed human nature diverge drastically between the two homeschooling camps. Christian homeschoolers believe that children are susceptible to human sin and need to be taught

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<sup>28</sup> Sarah Karnasiewicz’s recent article “Endless Summer” on Unschooling in *Salon.com* speaks to the growing public interest to unschooling. <http://www.salon.com/mwt/feature/2005/10/03/unschool/>.

<sup>29</sup> Stevens groups all types of homeschooling other than homeschooling for religious reasons as “inclusives.” Within his “inclusive” grouping, “parents often have little in common with one another other than their shared interest in home schooling” (p.19, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*). Unschooling could be considered just one type among many “other” practices. In this thesis, I focus on patterns and conflicts among people who self-identify as unschoolers.

<sup>30</sup> p.150, Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.

how to behave from a higher authority.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile unschoolers believe that children, as innately good and as natural learners, should be respected as such. While Christian homeschoolers across the country join in a highly hierarchical formation with mechanisms for reproducing its rank and file, unschooling couldn't be further from this organizational model. One of Stevens' ethnographic insights is particularly useful: when inclusives, who are inherently a very diverse and independent lot, come together for meetings or gatherings, they sit in circles.<sup>32</sup> "This means that [inclusives and people who homeschool for religious reasons] tend to have different guiding images—different schemata—for how to assemble themselves into collectives."<sup>33</sup> Not unlike the circles in which they sit, patterns of grassroots media build up a language through which unschoolers express their progressive philosophy and lifestyle.

### **Beyond the Limits of School Reform: New Words, New Discourses**

When most people hear "progressive" in the context of education, they think of John Dewey. In the early 1920s, there was heady enthusiasm about the "modern" and "new" experiments in education. However, even during the 20s and 30s, the mainstream never fully accepted Progressive school reform, which was always contested, even misunderstood by those who called themselves Progressives. Some pin this on Dewey's impenetrable academic writing style, a mode of communication that unschoolers would come to reject. Head of Holt Associates, Inc and former editor of *Growing Without Schooling*, Pat Farenga suggested to me that a John Dewey speech would be a bit more lucid. John Dewey, in a 1928 address at the Eight Annual Conference of the Progressive

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.109.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p.198.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p.109.

Educational Association, cautioned his followers to not give in to every whim of the child:

*“An exaggerated illustration, amounting to a caricature, may perhaps make the point clearer... Suppose there is a school in which pupils are surrounded with a wealth of material objects, apparatus and tools of all sorts. Suppose they are simply asked what they would like to do and then told in effect to ‘go to it,’ the teacher keeping hands—and mind, too—off. What are they going to do? What assurance is there that what they do is anything more than the expression—and exhaustion—of a momentary interest and impulse?”—John Dewey<sup>34</sup>*

One gets the sense from Dewey’s speech that the discourse of *freedom* in the schools was spiraling out of control.<sup>35</sup> Another line of argument was pitted against school reform, saying that family and community mattered much more to a child’s development than schools did anyway. Ironically, “Progressive educators looking at the Eight Year Study had reported this finding without realizing it, taking the success of the affluent students in their study as a justification for their new pedagogy.”<sup>36</sup> This power shift and internal conflict within the schools eventually acted as the jumping-off point for a new crop of radical theories about learning.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> “Dewey’s Warning to Radicals in Education,” *Elementary School Journal*, May 1928. One can already see the schism: unschoolers would come to believe in the absolute trust in the child’s innate curiosity while even the father of Progressive reform sees it as an “exhaustible” whim. Dewey is famous for his view that socialization in school plays a crucial role in developing participatory citizenship. However, the unschoolers question the institution’s role in compelling participation in a teacherly manner. Rather, most unschoolers envision children learning citizenship through modeling adults in direct democracy. The role of the parents in unschooling is crucial, though much confusion remains about the nature of their practices. In part, I believe these practices are obscured by the unschoolers’ argument for children’s freedom when that concept is so far removed from the mainstream’s understanding. This thesis, in part, attempts to bring the parents and children’s practices to light. Interestingly, a conservative online list credits Dewey as being the 5th of the *Ten Most Harmful Books of the 19th and 20th Centuries*, <http://www.humaneventsonline.com/article.php?id=7591>.

<sup>35</sup> The freedom of children in schools and Progressive teachers who believed they were acting in the best interests of children’s freedom were raising eyebrows, and John Dewey knew that his project was under threat of morphing from his original vision. This discourse was a fight between the Progressives and their critics, whose “position strengthened dramatically when at the height of the Cold War the Soviet Union launched the first satellite, Sputnik, in October 1957.” The Progressive agenda also weakened with Dewey’s death in 1952. (p.106, Pat Graham, *Schooling America: How the Public Schools Meet the Nation’s Changing Needs*).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.125.

<sup>37</sup> With the period from WWII to the beginning of the Cold War, possibilities of thought constricted even more in mainstream America. American parents started seeing headlines like “Wasn’t the regular public school good enough for us?” in *Good Housekeeping* in 1939 (p.24 Davis). “I’ve raised three selfish little savages” in *American Home*, 1944 (p.70). Then in the January 26, 1952 issue of *The Nation*, “Progressive Education Condemned”: “My criticism is that with their excessive emphasis upon the individual’s progress, the progressives willingly sacrifice the interests of the larger group.” (p.95 Charles Salkind, Letter to the Editor in response to *The Nation’s* series “Battle for Free School” 1952).

Ivan Illich, one of the first thinkers who advocated for “deschooling” in his 1971 book *Deschooling Society*, recognized the importance of family and community too. In our conversation, Aaron Falbel, who had been a friend of Illich, noted the emphasis on *society* in Illich’s title. But instead of using the societal interconnectedness with school’s dysfunctions as an excuse for the status quo or befuddled attempts for better implementation of reforms, Illich saw it as a cue for radical change. People invested in the public school system argued about innovation and implementation and tried to figure out why “despite the large expenditures of money, time, and energy devoted to these efforts, ... the programs had little impact on upgrading the academic achievement of students...As the decade of the 1970’s unfolds, therefore, it is not surprising to find that educational administrators in big-city school systems are sorely troubled by the negligible educational effects resulting from the numerous innovations that have been introduced into their schools.”<sup>38</sup> Illich claimed that school shouldn’t be reformed, precisely because *institutionalized schooling was part of the problem*. Just as Margaret Mead, who was educated not-in-school for much of her life, dared to ask, “What, if anything, is to be done about school,” unschoolers questioned the very supposition that school is fundamentally necessary or benevolent.<sup>39</sup> As a start to the argument, these thinkers invented a new vocabulary: Illich with “deschooling” in 1971 and later in the 70s with John Holt’s term “unschooling.”

“Homeschooling moved from ‘home schooling’ two words to ‘home-schooling’ hyphenated and then, as so many hyphenated words do, to ‘homeschooling’ one word” Susannah told me during our conversation. Many self-identifying unschoolers stressed

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<sup>38</sup> p.4, Gross, Giacquinta & Bernstein, *Implementing Organizational Innovations: A Sociological Analysis of Planned Educational Change*.

<sup>39</sup> p.72, Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter*.



that the word “homeschool” is inherently misleading, because unschoolers have no intention of taking the structure, social relationships and educational materials of school and simply reconstituting them in the home. Reflecting on her conversation with a doubting relative, an unschooling mom wrote:

*“Homeschooling is really a misnomer, at least in the way some people view it. It doesn't have to be school at home. It will be, for my family, learning everywhere. Learning from and with people of different ages, talents, and perspectives”*

—Deesha Philyaw Thomas<sup>40</sup>

Unschooling shifts the discourse to the question: how do people learn, then, without school and schoolish behavior?

Today, unschoolers continue to deconstruct language. A linguistic anthropological approach is useful in examining such pairings as *teaching and learning*, *learning and schooling*. Unschoolers engage with these texts online and also in face-to-face discussions:

*“[M]aybe this is, in part, an English language problem. Because in Romance languages (Latin-based, Italian, French, Spanish...) they used ‘maestro’ or forms thereof. ‘Master’ or ‘Mistress’ of an art or body of knowledge. Someone can be a maestro with no followers or students. One can't very well be a teacher without the presence of a student. But anyway, we do have in modern English the pair ‘teach and learn.’”*—Sandra Dodd<sup>41</sup>

Historically, the words *deschooling* and *unschooling* marked the conscious departure from the institution of school and culturally instituted schoolish behavior. “John [Holt] created the word unschooling to describe how we help children learn without duplicating ideas and practices that we learned in school.”<sup>42</sup> Early on, “sometimes Holt used it to refer to the process of making the transition from school to homeschooling—the kind of getting-school-out-of-your-head-detoxing-thing,” Susannah explained to me. But then

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<sup>40</sup> *Unschooling.com*, <http://www.unschooling.com/library/essays/conversationpart1.shtml>.

<sup>41</sup> Sandra Dodd is the unschooling mom and advocate featured in the fourth case study. This quote is taken from *SandraDodd.com* (<http://sandraddodd.com/wordswords>).

<sup>42</sup> p.xvii, Pat Farenga’s preface to *Teach Your Own* by John Holt.

something transpired—“a phenomenon happened in the culture, not in Holt Associates,” and the word *unschooling* began to take on a life of its own. Susannah took a breath and voiced her own frustrations with its usage:

*“I began to feel that it was harmful to speak as though homeschooling and unschooling referred to two distinct practices. I understand the impulse that makes families want to say ‘we’re unschoolers.’ I definitely understand why that term can seem preferable, and more accurate, than saying ‘we’re homeschoolers.’ But it gets problematic when you imply that homeschooling is one thing and unschooling an entirely different thing. If a story comes out in the newspaper with the headline, ‘Homeschoolers successful at college admissions,’ how should readers interpret that? As only referring to ‘homeschoolers’ and not to those families who call themselves unschoolers? It’s confusing, and also inaccurate in a way that does self-described unschooling families a disservice, because unschoolers are very successful at college admissions too. Do those families really want to cede the term ‘homeschooler’ so that it only refers to people who homeschool in a particular way? The other problem is that ‘unschooling’ is not a legally recognized term. If your kids are out of school legally, you are homeschooling; that’s how the term is understood.”*

But many unschoolers take pride in articulating their differences from other

homeschoolers. Susannah shakes her head and continues:

*“But then I think the reason I feel most strongly about not making such a firm distinction between the two terms is that the boundary between the two is actually way too fluid to be meaningful or clear. When is a family not homeschooling and instead unschooling? What precisely do they have to do, or not do, in order to be unschoolers? You’ll find a lot of disagreement about this, and, in my experience, a lot of apologizing. People say to me all the time, ‘We’re not really unschoolers because we use a schedule.’ Where was it ever written that unschooling and schedules are mutually exclusive? Holt didn’t like the idea of arbitrary schedules, but you can certainly have schedules in a self-directed life full of chosen activities. Same for textbooks. If you have a picture of a child sitting at a table holding a textbook, is that unschooling? Well, it can’t be determined from the information given. Did the child and parent choose the textbook together; is reading that textbook helping the child pursue her own goals? You have to know a lot about the situation before you can start to characterize it. Holt’s ideas were more textured and subtle than these terms sometimes imply. In any case, because of all these potential problems and confusions, I would rather use the term ‘homeschooling’ for all cases of people legally learning outside of school, and then recognize that there are many different ways of doing that.”<sup>43</sup>*

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<sup>43</sup> Recorded audio interview with Bertozzi, December 15, 2005. Susannah also revised some of the wording of her quotes with me in April 2006.

Susannah has a point: as soon as terms get flash-baked, members of a subculture often start policing the boundaries, deeming some as more unschoolish than others. This is particularly contentious because it's taking place in a subculture whose one rule—some may say—is that there are no rules.

The roots of these words as tools of critical theory, influenced by the Frankfurt School, reflect their function but also the intellectual environment of that time. In the 1970s, these new words served their function well. Like levers, they were used by Illich and other thinkers to heft a new discourse into view, one that actually leapt over reformist discourse, bounded as it was by the walls of school and conventional socio-cultural norms. Pink Floyd's *The Wall* acts out a musical theater interpretation of the space and symbolism of school. Pink Floyd released the album in 1979 and the movie in 1982. To images of benumbed, school-uniformed children being carried on a conveyor belt to a meat grinder, we sing along to:

*“We don't need no education  
We don't need no thought control  
No dark sarcasm in the classroom  
Teachers leave them kids alone  
Hey! Teachers! Leave them kids alone!  
All in all it's just another brick in the wall.” —Pink Floyd<sup>44</sup>*

The song became—and still is—an anthem for angsty teens. It serves as the mainstream's most notable critique of the unschooling ilk. “Discourses constrain the possibilities of thought,” as Ball explains Foucault's discourse analysis.<sup>45</sup> Like *The Wall* or even *The Matrix*, part of the project of unschooling is exposing the bulwark within which we conceptualize learning. And not to simply imagine what's on the other side of

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<sup>44</sup> Alan Parker & Roger Waters, *Pink Floyd The Wall*, 1982.

<sup>45</sup> p.2, Stephen Ball quoting Foucault in *Foucault and Education: Disciplines and Knowledge*.

the wall or outside of the matrix, but to actually practice unschooling in this new discursive space.

Mainstream American discourse positions public schools as central to American democracy. When in the late 70s and throughout the 80s, the right to homeschool was battled in the courts, “it seemed increasingly to bring into question whether something had happened in the development of public education to have brought it into conflict with the principles of individual liberty and free and vigorous dissent upon which our constitutional order rests. One might have thought that this contradiction was put to rest in 1925 when the *Pierce* case denied the legitimacy of a government monopoly of schooling. One might also have thought the matter had been settled in Massachusetts in 1897 when the state’s highest court interpreted the compulsory education statute to allow home education and enunciated the purpose of compulsory education to be ‘that all children shall be educated, not that they shall be educated in any particular way.’”<sup>46</sup> Controversy and confusion over how to instill skills and a love of learning while also teaching the necessary facts and figures were compounded by a difficulty in conceptualizing the hierarchy between the individual and the group. When unschoolers rejected the discourse of school reform and institutional practices altogether, society viewed them as tampering with accepted norms of institutionalized socialization. “We must make allowance for the complex and unstable powers whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy”<sup>47</sup> Unschoolers claimed that the failures of Progressive reform were actually internal flaws. Unschoolers

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<sup>46</sup> p.85-6, Stephen Arons, *Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling*.

<sup>47</sup> p.2, Stephen Ball, *Foucault and Education: Disciplines and Knowledge*.

positioned school reform as an oxymoron: how do you reform a system that is so rigid and further, as author and unschooling advocate John Taylor Gatto titled one of his essays, “why fix a system designed to destroy individual thought?”<sup>48</sup>

### **The Beginnings of a Movement: Outside of the System**

Around 1966, liberals who were concerned about education started moving outside the public school system, first to establish Free Schools, which were democratically run by families and community members, and later, some would eventually unschool their own children. The Sudbury Valley School in Framingham, MA, founded in 1968, was one of the first. Jonathan Kozol wrote about starting such a school and the emergence of the Free School movement in his 1972 handbook *Free Schools*:

*“From St. Paul and Minneapolis and Winston-Salem and Santa Fe and Santa Barbara, from Toronto and Philadelphia and San Francisco and Cincinnati and St. Louis, came letters and phone calls, then newsletters, private papers, Free School magazines and all varieties of confident and hopeful dialogue and interchange. Some of these schools, of course, had started up as early as we, and one or two (as we now learned) had started up before us; but suddenly now, all in a rush around the winter of 1969 and spring of 1970, each of us began to be aware of one another. We started to sense that we were not out on our own, but that we were in fact part of a growing movement.”—Jonathan Kozol<sup>49</sup>*

When looking at the historical and cultural context of this moment, *the System* becomes an important concept. It relates to a particularly American notion of the public school as a bureaucratic monolith of state power, with media coverage playing out dramas hinging on mythologized American democracy. The late 60s were reeling from desegregation and reforms. Public schools are funded for the most part at the local level, which made compliance with federal reforms all the more difficult. Historically, state subsidies and attendant regulations have not been extended to private, independent, or religious schools

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<sup>48</sup> John Taylor Gatto in ed. Matt Hern’s *Deschooling Our Lives*.

<sup>49</sup> p.5-6, Jonathan Kozol, *Free Schools*.

in the United States. This arrangement is not the case in say, Denmark, where independent schools can gain 85% of their budget from public funds as long as they prove themselves sustainable for their first year of operation, according to Aaron Falbel. Perhaps if the American relationship between citizens and school had not been so rigid and fraught, the Liberals' move outside of the System might not have occurred. Perhaps, things might have been different if this dichotomy hadn't activated another strong America trait: fierce individualism, pioneerism. The core dynamic being as it was, the unschoolers sought to de-institutionalize learning through enacting utopian visions—counter to a dystopian vision of school. They did so in a new realm of integrated learning in everyday life, outside the discourse of public education and education reform, and eventually mostly outside of the context of Free Schools as well.

The urban Free School movement, as expressed through Kozol's writing, did not *quite* share one unique vision. To set up his reasoning, Kozol references Thomas Powers' book on Bill Ayers and Diana Oughton, *Diana: The Making of a Terrorist*. A member of the Weather Underground, "Ayers was the founder and one of the central figures in one of the original Free Schools in this country: a school that he started in Ann Arbor, Michigan, began in 1966...Ayers and his friends were committed to helping the black children, but 'rejected the terms on which the black parents wanted their children to be helped.'"<sup>50</sup> While also a struggle against the System, Kozol's movement would come to fight in a different way—a way he felt was more aligned with the wants and needs of inner city minorities.

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<sup>50</sup> Kozol criticized the experimental, radical teaching methods and believed that traditional methods to teaching reading, writing and math were preferable, however, outside of the traditional context of school and in the context of Free School (p.32, Jonathan Kozol, *Free Schools*).

In the late 60s, Holt, Kozol, Goodman, and others converged at Illich's Center for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico. "CIDOC soon came to be an important international 'think tank' of scholars, historians, philosophers, and social critics. Such prominent thinkers as Paulo Freire, Everett Reimer, Jonathan Kozol, Paul Goodman, and John Holt shared their thoughts and writings during their stay at CIDOC, and it was here, over the span of numerous discussions, that the essay 'The Futility of Schooling in Latin America' would later develop into the book *Deschooling Society*."<sup>51</sup> By 1972, Kozol wrote that "visiting and talking twice with Ivan Illich and his colleague Everett Reimer during the course of seminars in Cuernavaca, I have twice come back to Boston to confront the hard realities...It is very appealing, at two thousand miles' distance, to entertain the notion of an educational experience that does not involve credentials or curriculum."<sup>52</sup> Even though Kozol and the urban Free School movement were leaving the public schools, the System was still "the irreducible framework for [their] work and struggle."<sup>53</sup> In other words, Kozol's camp was fighting inside the Matrix, not so radical as to leave it behind, nor to actually take up arms as the Weathermen had. Deschoolers and unschoolers would come to have a different stance towards the System and schools of any kind.

Kozol's 1972 handbook *Free Schools* serves as an historical record into a cultural flashpoint, which divided the Left's practices of media production and consumption relating to learning. "The term free school is used very often, in a cheerful but unthinking way, to mean entirely different kinds of things and to define the dreams and yearnings of

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Schugurensky, *Selected Moments of the 20th Century* ([http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel\\_schugurensky/assignment1/1970illich.html](http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~daniel_schugurensky/assignment1/1970illich.html)).

<sup>52</sup> p.38, Jonathan Kozol, *Free Schools*.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

entirely disparate and even antagonistic individuals and groups.”<sup>54</sup> Kozol placed his vision of inner city Free Schools at one end and at “the opposite extreme is a rather familiar type of relatively isolated, politically non-controversial and generally all-white rural Free School. This kind of school is often tied in with a commune or with what is described as an ‘intentional community,’ attracts people frequently who, if not rich themselves, have parents who are wealthy, and is often associated with a certain kind of media-promoted counter-culture.”<sup>55</sup> It was not just the trappings of hippydom that bothered Kozol, nor just the limelight they were undeservedly hogging, but also a difference in how media should be used in pedagogy. “It is, too often, the rich white kids who speak three languages with native fluency, at the price of sixteen years of high-cost, rigorous and sequential education, who are the most determined that poor kids should make clay vases, weave Indian headbands, play with Polaroid cameras, climb over geodesic domes.”<sup>56</sup> Kozol’s criticism of such Free Schools hinges on what some might see as their unschoolish approach to media as a tool for learning. Additionally, he quite literally views rural as representing *escape*, associating it with “the urge to run away, especially when [he] see[s] a picture or read[s] something in a magazine about these pastoral and isolated Free Schools in their gentle and attractive settings of a hillside.”<sup>57</sup> He draws a set of distinctions between urban vs. rural, black vs. white, text-based literacy vs. multi-media/experiential learning. Kozol’s Free Schools for the most part were not able to sustain themselves. He returned to advocating for public school reform directly within the System. He remains an important voice in that struggle, as evidenced by his

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.33.

<sup>57</sup> I think this urban vs. rural distinction still exists, though now it’s the rural unschoolers who feel isolated and trapped. I discuss this in the third and fifth case studies. I would also relate Kozol’s binary here to present day anti-technology unschoolers’ notions of cyberspace as “escape.” (p.8, Jonathan Kozol, *Free Schools*).



books, the most recent coming out fall 2005, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*.

### **Mix-n-Match: Unschooling Freedom & Subcultural Grassroots**

But why and how did the unschoolers take this leap to a new discourse, a total rejection of the institution of school and schoolish power relationships? This shift in discourse did not spring from a historical vacuum, nor was it a simple trajectory from Progressive reform. Rather, unschooling arose from a complex set of specific cultural tensions in the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century. Unschooling branched in equally complex ways, eddying and overlapping. As a researcher, I cannot claim discovery of rigid or completely coherent subsets within the subculture of unschooling. However, I have theorized a set of mix-n-match strains, which can be read according to unschoolers' media practices. Such a cultural construction of grassroots media fulfills the needs of the rhizome-like structure of unschooling. As one of Mitchell Steven's interviewees observed, "We're not an 'organization.' We're a loose coalition of individuals.' The comment met with chuckles, as if to indicate that such was true in theory if not entirely in fact."<sup>58</sup>

Unschooling reveals the true complexity of history and culture. Giving a hippy metaphor a try, I would venture to say: if unschooling media were a textile pattern, it would be paisley. Various elements coil together, foregrounding structures, while negative shapes also contain detail. The paisley designer revels in his own act of creativity, organic and idiosyncratic. In fractal-like patterns within patterns, unschooling

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<sup>58</sup> p.111, Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.

media practices and self-representations have surprised me and confounded my attempts to uncoil its strands and set the record straight.

A number of grassroots movements can be mixed in matched in relation to unschooling. La Leche league, a support group for nursing mothers, and homebirth come out of the grassroots feminism and a move to de-institutionalize and de-pathologize women's health and mothering. Another such strand is the Afro-centric unschooling movement, which grew out of the cultural context of the Civil Rights movement and desegregation (or in actuality, the lack thereof, as Kozol's most recent book points out).<sup>59</sup> Unschoolers cluster whichever of these movements relate to their lives, and through these subcultural threads weave a holistic and integrated lifestyle.<sup>60</sup> The way race and class play out through this grassroots media sheds light on the flexibility around some of the core philosophies of unschooling. Unfortunately, it's beyond the scope of this thesis to analyze all of these strands—notably feminism and urban African-American issues—within the subculture.

I mention these movements, which travel with unschooling, because they support each other with their grassroots mechanisms for producing, consuming and distributing media. But they also inform meaning and modes of representation within unschooling, which in turn shapes ideology about media and technology in learning. Benedict Anderson has described this action as communities “imagining” themselves. Uricchio

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<sup>59</sup> For more on African American and multi-cultural unschooling, see Grace Llewellyn's *Freedom Challenge: African American Homeschoolers*.

<sup>60</sup> *But wait*, my reader might be thinking. *Didn't you just say that unschoolers are white hippies?* An advocate for black-urban unschoolers, William Upski Wimsatt referenced the mainstream media's representation of the right wing homeschoolers and figured that this scares off many black people from homeschooling: “homeschooling has such a stigma as a ‘kooky fringe white thing’” (p.68, William Upski Wimsatt, *No More Prisons!: Urban Life, Homeschooling, Hip-Hop Leadership, The Cool Rich Kids Movement, A Hitchhiker's Guide to Community Organizing, and Why Philanthropy is the Greatest Art Form of the 21st Century*). Nevertheless, black unschooling exists, small but growing. According to a Sunday, December 11, 2005 *New York Times* article, “Home Schools Are Becoming More Popular Among Blacks,” black homeschoolers are the largest growing group. This topic was the focus of another paper I wrote for a class on the Digital Divide, that I took Fall 2005 at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

and Pearson make use of Hayden White's concept of emplotment in their piece

*Constructing the Audience: Competing Discourses of Morality and Rationalization*

*During the Nickelodeon Period:*<sup>61</sup>

“...any given set of real events can be emplotted in a number of ways, can bear the weight of being told as any number of different kinds of stories... it is the choice of the story type and its imposition upon the events that endow them with meaning.”—Hayden White<sup>62</sup>

In other words, if we examine narrativity of unschoolers' historiography, we discover meaning in how they imagine the roles of media and technology in everyday learning.

In the early days of the movement, an important rupture took place at the breaking point between technology and freedom. Understanding what the unschoolers defined as *freedom* and what they saw as standing in the way of that freedom is elemental in the unschoolers' new discourse. Kozol's Free Schoolers and Illich's deschoolers alike, defined freedom as *freedom of a people from oppression*. But their differing cultural constructions of learning led to diverging beliefs about how media tools should be used. This aggravated the tensions within the population, and like a piece of music with many different themes, bursts of dissonance were in the air. What follows here is my historical reading of an axis of differentiation in the unschooling population: pro-technology vs. anti-technology.

### **A Fork in the Road: The Technocratic Critique**

In the cultural context of 1950s and 60s, the military-industrial complex ushered in an era of what the Left perceived as *Technocratic Authoritarianism*. Coming as they

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<sup>61</sup> William Uricchio & Pearson, “Constructing the Audience: Competing Discourses of Morality and Rationalization During the Nickelodeon Period” in their forthcoming book *The Nickel Madness: The Struggle Over New York City's Nickelodeons*.

<sup>62</sup> p.44, Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*.

did from the distinctive background of the well-educated Left, these early unschoolers yoked technology and media together and held this coupling to the scrutiny of critical theory. The intellectuals who played a part in laying the ground work for unschooling did not have a name for their intellectual movement but learned from each other and referenced each other “in a crisscrossing network of shared ideas...These writers invariably appear in the acknowledgements of each other’s books (or if not they usually write glowing blurbs that appear on the back covers).”<sup>63</sup> Moved by a humanist impulse, they saw the System controlling the populace through technology and locking the dominant discourse in technocratic conceptions of human behavior. This era brought a new wave of standardization. James B. Conant, president of Harvard College, changed its admission system to facilitate a SAT-proven, merit-based student body, rather than what Harvard had been—a finishing school for the wealthy. While our Americans meritocracy conditions most of us to support such standards, unschoolers of that era viewed standardized testing with suspicion.<sup>64</sup> What has become part and parcel of our American educational system, back then shocked the unschoolers into rebellion. Quantitative methods of sorting people carried connotations of industrialist social engineering. In the unschoolers’ eyes, quantitative methods were simply a new iteration of the same old trick—a sleight of hand that obscured the internal mechanisms of power and distinction—what Pierre Bourdieu discusses in *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*:

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<sup>63</sup> p.9, Aaron Falbel, *Friskolen 70: an Ethnographically Informed Inquiry into the Social Context of Learning*.

<sup>64</sup> Kirsten Olson discusses the technocratic critique as in part a “a renewed interest in Marxist, a revival of neo-Marxian critique, and new attention to critical theory and the works of Frankfurt School Theorists...As students increasingly occupied universities and stages protests within them, institutions of higher education were often critiqued for their ‘technological rationality,’ and were seen as allied with an increasingly mechanical system that disregarded or suppressed the human search for meaning. The function of the university itself, like elementary and high schools, was called into question”(p.37, *To Be Brave and Subversive Human Beings: The Deschoolers of the 1960s*).

*“Every institutionalized educational system (ES) owes the specific characteristics of its structure and functioning to the fact that, by the means proper to the institution, it has to produce and reproduce the institutional conditions whose existence and persistence (self-reproduction of the system) are necessary both to the exercise of its essential function of inculcation and to the fulfillment of its function of reproducing a cultural arbitrary which it does not produce (cultural reproduction), the reproduction of which contributes to the reproduction of the relations between the groups or classes (social reproduction).”*

—Pierre Bourdieu<sup>65</sup>

In this way, unschoolers tried to resist reproducing the rising tide of modern quantitative or technocratic modes of thought. Subsequently, they critiqued modernism in education as dehumanizing.

While the politics and scientific approach of the Cold War era set the stage for the unschoolers’ radical resistance, they would also come to hold mass media—with its implicating political, economic, and cultural traditions—up to scrutiny. Writing at the time of the Vietnam War, Illich warned that the technocratic approach combined with mainstream technology and media interlocked in a type of fascist combination:

*“The tolerance of the American people to United States atrocities in Vietnam is much higher than the tolerance of the German people to German atrocities...during World War II. In fact, it can be argued that the Germans were more aware precisely because they were not psychologically overwhelmed with packaged information about killing and torture, because they were not drugged into accepting that everything is possible, because they were not vaccinated against reality by having it fed to them as decomposed ‘bits’ on a screen. The consumer of precooked knowledge learns to react to knowledge he has acquired rather than to the reality from which a team of experts has abstracted it.”*

—Ivan Illich<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> p.54, Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*. Just for a bit of contrast, unschooler Vernon wrote to me about Olympia Free School, where he volunteers/works: “Free School works to bring people together in a format that supports the idea that everyone is a teacher and everyone is a student, and that learning does not end once a bell rings or once you exit a building. By coordinating classes where there are ‘facilitators’ and ‘participants’, recognizing knowledge and skills are inherent in everyone, and challenging the hierarchical teacher-student model, the Olympia Free School plants a seed in those involved that they carry with them when they leave. This seed then plants itself, sprouts, and flowers over and over again furthering the idea that learning is continuous and naturally occurring” (<http://www.olympiafreeschool.org/>). The system of reproduction here is framed through an entirely different natural and naturalized discourse: growth and blossoming of a flower. It’s important to note that unschoolers oppose the compulsory nature of school. Unschoolers who attend and work at Free Schools see this as an important distinction. The social benefits of bringing unschoolers together at Free Schools are great, and we’re seeing a renewed interest in such organizations.

<sup>66</sup> One marvels at how Illich would have critiqued the embedding of journalists in the Iraq War. (p.16-17, Ivan Illich in *After Deschooling, What?*, eds. Alan Gartner, Colin Greer, Frank Riessman).

During this era, experts were extending the behavior-modification ideas of B.F. Skinner to a range of areas, notably education. Behaviorism and the consumer model of communication entered into the zeitgeist. And while the unschoolers resisted behavior modification as a tool for schooling, the method seems to have seeped into their ideological framing of media and technology. The slippage of Marx’s metaphor “religion is the opiate of the masses,” when applied to media, news, images, programs, and especially advertising, transformed these media into ingestible drugs, manufactured by oppressive forces. This metaphor of addiction, which moves through a therapeutic dialectic, serves the same purpose as the other central, techno-determinist metaphor, which draws on a corporatized, scientific mode: anxiety over whether media “programs” humans like computers. Both of these readings spell out core philosophical problematics of human *freedom* in relation to technology and media. Consequently, people attempt to assert free will through practices of abstinence and opposition. People stage personal boycotts against television. TVs are thrown out, hitched to family rules, smashed.

In his critique of organized society in relation to education, Goodman wrote: “it will then be claimed that...progressive education is a failure; and finally, indeed—as in Dr. James Conant’s report on the high schools—that only 15 percent of the youth are ‘academically talented’ enough to be taught hard subjects.”<sup>67</sup> But perhaps Goodman’s most frightening critique was “since no doubt many people *are* quite clear about the connection that the structure of society that has become increasingly dominant in our society is disastrous to the growth of excellence ..., why don’t more people speak up and say so, and initiate a change? ...[T]he answer is, I think, a terrible one: that people are so bemused by the way business and politics are carried on at present, with all their intricate

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<sup>67</sup> p.xi, Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized Society*.

relationships, that they have ceased to be able to imagine alternatives.”<sup>68</sup> Foucault has discussed that true hegemony takes root when the populace has internalized social controls. Anxiety over this sort of brainwashing and “drugging” led to the unschooling movement’s radical critical distance. To gain this distance, some liberals protested in the streets, some abandoned mainstream American life for communes, some homesteaded in remote areas, some simply stopped going to school.

The insidiousness of the System, then, triggered a high state of alert in those who opposed its hegemony. Critical readings become a way of deciphering the secret code of the System, embedded as it was in the mass media and in the school textbook. For some unschoolers, this led to a practice of media and technology abstinence. “It is then ironic to remember that the force of Marx’s original criticism had been mainly directed against the separation of ‘areas’ of thought and activity...and against the related evacuation of specific content—real human activities—by the imposition of abstract categories.”<sup>69</sup> As Raymond Williams describes “a radical persistence of the modes of thought,” some present day unschoolers have become more radical than even the original unschoolers of the 60s and 70s. Today these unschoolers engage in a reading of all media as addictive and conducive to consumerist behavior. They reject the idea that the Internet could have transformative potential as a tool. Thus Illich’s writing on technology provides a crucial fork in the road:

*“Data and skills an individual might have acquired shape into exploratory, creative, open-ended, and personal meaning only when they are used in a dialectic encounter. And this requires the guaranteed freedom for every individual to state, each day, the class of issue which he wants to discuss, the class of creative use of a skill in which he seeks a match—to make this bid*

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.x.

<sup>69</sup> p.587, Raymond Williams, “Selections from Marxism and Literature” in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*.

*known—and, within reason, to find the circumstances to meet with peers who join his class. The rights of free speech, free press, and free assembly have traditionally meant this freedom. Modern electronics, photo-offset, and computer technologies in principle have provided the hardware that can provide this freedom with a range of undreamt of in the century of the enlightenment. Unfortunately, the scientific know-how has been used mainly to increase the power and decrease the number of funnels through which the bureaucrats of education, politics, and information channel their quick frozen TV dinners. But the same technology could be used to make peer-matching, meeting, and printing as available as the private conversation over the telephone is now.”—Ivan Illich<sup>70</sup>*

A bifurcation resulted from Illich’s critique of how technology was used at that time versus its potential. Like a stereoscopic image, placing the two images of these opposing strands of practice side-by-side results in a more “in-depth” perception of the world of unschooling.

### **The Roots of Techno-Utopia**

Many of the youths during the era of the 60s and 70s could be labeled “counterculture” or “hippy.” But as I’ve looked closer, differentiations within the Left reveal the roots of unschooling’s conflicting approaches to media and technology. Today, some unschoolers embrace the Internet and integrate media and technology into learning, while some avoid or actively shun media and technology. These internal conflicts emerged right from the beginning of the era and are embedded within unschooling’s cultural tradition.

This thesis investigates two conflicting cultural constructions of learning with media and technology. Others have written about similar distinctions among the Left, however usually in the context of politics, but not education. Fred Turner’s recent research has recently focused on the *Whole Earth Catalog* and the virtual community

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<sup>70</sup> p.27, Ivan Illich, in *After Deschooling, What?*, eds. Alan Gartner, Colin Greer, Frank Riessman.



WELL.<sup>71</sup> “In the late 1960s, young, predominantly white, middle-class college students developed two distinct, if sometimes overlapping, social movements within which they could challenge mainstream bureaucracies. The first grew out of the struggles for civil rights in the Deep South and the Free Speech Movement at the University of California at Berkeley and would become known as the New Left. The second bubbled up from a wide variety of cold war–era cultural springs, including beat poetry and fiction, Zen Buddhism, action painting, and, by the mid-1960s, encounters with psychedelic drugs. Across the 1960s, this second movement would often be called simply ‘the counterculture.’”<sup>72</sup>

Turner goes on to make this distinction between the “New Left” and those he calls the “New Communalists”:

*“Both the New Left and the counterculture hoped to transform the technocratic bureaucracies that, in their view, had brought Americans the cold war and the conflict in Vietnam. Both also hoped to return Americans to a more emotionally authentic and community-based way of life. The New Left, led by the Students for a Democratic Society, pursued these goals as insurgent political movements always have: they wrote statements, formed parties, chose leaders, held news conferences. Many members of the counterculture however, stepped away from agonistic politics and sought instead to change the world by establishing new, exemplary communities from which a corrupt mainstream might draw inspiration. For this group, whom I will call the New Communalists, as for many others in the counterculture, the key to social transformation lay not in changing a political regime but in changing the consciousness of individuals. Theodore Roszak, who popularized the term ‘counterculture,’ spoke for many New Communalists when he argued in 1969 that the central problem underlying the rationalized bureaucracy of the cold war was not political structure but the ‘myth of objective*

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<sup>71</sup> Fred Turner, in his forthcoming book, *Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy: The WELL and the Origins of Virtual Community*, gives this summary of the origins of the *Whole Earth Catalog*: “In the spring of 1968, Stewart Brand, a former Merry Prankster and coproducer of the Trips Festival that helped spark the Haight-Ashbury psychedelic scene, noticed that many of his friends had begun to leave the city for the wilds of New Mexico and Northern California. As sociologists and journalists would soon explain, these migrants marked the leading edge of what would become the largest wave of communalization in American history. Brand had just inherited a hundred thousand dollars in stock and, as he recalled several years later, imagining his friends ‘starting their own civilization hither and yon in the sticks’ got him thinking about the L.L.Bean catalog. This in turn led him to fantasize something he called the ‘Access Mobile’ that would offer ‘all manner of access materials and advice for sale cheap,’ including books, camping gear, blueprints for houses and machines, and subscriptions to magazines”(p.487). This turns out to be the idea for the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Turner interviews Rheingold whose book *Homesteading on the Virtual Frontier* follows the emergence of the so-called virtual community on the early BBS *Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link*.

<sup>72</sup> p.493, Fred Turner, *Where the Counterculture Met the New Economy: The WELL and the Origins of Virtual Community*.

*consciousness.’ This state of mind, wrote Roszak, emerged among the experts who dominated rationalized organizations and was conducive to alienation, hierarchy, and a mechanistic view of social life.”—Fred Turner<sup>73</sup>*

Turner goes on to analyze how the New Communalists forged new ways of producing, consuming and distributing computer-mediated technology, primarily in social ways.

Turner’s explanation of the shared underlying motivation of the New Left and New Communalists—societal change—still rings true for unschoolers.

The Cold War political atmosphere led to an anti-technology bent amongst some of the Left’s politically active, especially during Vietnam, as they were particularly concerned with media and technology as a tool used by the technocratic authority for repression and control. As Henry Jenkins told me, during the Vietnam War, to “‘fold, spindle or mutilate’ punch cards was often seen as political act against the machine.” In his cultural history of the punch card, Steven Lubar writes about the Free Speech Movement at the University of California Berkeley. He explains the use of the punch card metaphor in its relationship to education and technology:

*“Opposition to the bureaucratic organization, standardization and automation of the university, and by extension, modern industrial society, were central themes of the protestors’ philosophy. In the most famous speech of the movement, Mario Savio used a memorable technological metaphor: ‘There’s a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, it makes you so sick at heart, that...you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon wheels...and you’ve got to make it stop. And you’ve got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you’re free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.’ Savio’s speech is famous, but few have realized that ‘the machine’ he had in mind was not merely a mechanical metaphor for society; it was, at least as much, a metaphor for information technology.”—Steven Lubar<sup>74</sup>*

Some of the students involved in activism would reject technology. Some members of the counterculture would seek to re-envision that technology in a utopian light. Reading Illich was a popular thing for a counter-culturalist to do at that time, and his “ideas helped

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Steven Lubar, "Do not fold, spindle or mutilate": A Cultural History of the Punch Card (<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/slubar/fsm.html>).

shape a radical technology movement in the 1970s based on the motion of from-the-bottom-up control of tools. Illich's influence had earlier found expression in Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*.”<sup>75</sup> An example of the sort of re-conceptualization of technology can be found in John Markoff's book, *What the Dormouse Said: How the 60s counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry*. Markoff introduces Fred Moore as the “unrecognized patron saint of the open-source software movement, which in turn has become a major force in the computer industry.”<sup>76</sup> Moore arrived in San Francisco at a *Whole Earth Catalog* party “from a trip to Mexico, and he was deeply involved in a project he had created called ‘Skool Resistance,’ which had grown from his draft resistance organizing in high schools as well as from some of the deschooling ideas of Ivan Illich.”<sup>77</sup> To make a long story short, Moore would burn some money in front of the crowd of early computer and counterculture people-in-the-know and encourage them to realize that “it was not about money, it was about people.”<sup>78</sup> In this short description of Moore, I see a hermeneutic nugget: the counterculture was internally conflicted about the role of technology and media in society, specifically in education, war, and commerce. For some, the mainstream patterns of usage would come to overburden media and technology with negative connotations, and for much of the counterculture “mainframe computers were synonymous with Big Brother and bureaucracy. Yet it was increasingly obvious to Moore that if the power of computer could be liberated, it would become a useful organizing tool.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> p.278, John Markoff, *What the Dormouse Said: How the 60s Counterculture Shaped the Personal Computer Industry*.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.197.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.256.

And yet, the Man or the System or Big Brother or the technocratic, organized society—that many-named, ubiquitous oppressor—also moved through the idiom of the American university student in the form of military-funded research. Manuel Castells points out that the culture of the Internet was innately steeped in the counterculture of student life of the 60s and 70s. That said, the computer science grad students “were too obsessed with their extraordinary technological adventure to see much of the world outside computers. They certainly did not see any problem in having their research funded by the Pentagon or even in joining ARPA [Advanced Research Projects Agency, the first instantiation of the Internet, funded by the Defense Department]...in the midst of the Vietnam War. And yet they were permeated with the values of individual freedom, of independent thinking, and of sharing and cooperation with their peers, all values that characterized the campus culture of the 1960s.”<sup>80</sup> Castells’ treatment of the emergence of the Internet is useful here because he not only shows how the form that technology took was influenced by—indeed built of—encultured human conceptions, but he also leaves the door open for my analysis. Those were the hippies *working for the Man*, thereby posing an internal conflict of interest within the Left. This tension within the Left is similar in structure to the one Kozol detailed: hippies fleeing urban problems, either by escaping to rural communes or to the nascent cyberspace. Today unschoolers grapple with the issues of real life vs. virtual community, technological control vs. freedom in everyday lives.

Castells points to the contradictions of the invention of the Internet—a hybrid of military-government power mixed with counterculture anti-authoritarianism. We can see why some unschoolers today are suspicious of the Internet. This internal conflict

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<sup>80</sup> p.24-5, Manuel Castells, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*.

magnifies the contradictions within the Left—and people who have strong belief systems might deem that hypocritical. ARPANET was funded by the military, and yet,

*“ARPANET, the main source of what ultimately became the Internet, ... was envisioned, deliberately designed, and subsequently managed by a determined group of computer scientists with a shared mission that had little to do with military strategy. It was rooted in a scientific dream to change the world through computer communication, although some of the participants in the group were content with just fostering good computer science... The culture of individual freedom sprouting in the university campuses of the 1960s and 1970s used computer networking to its own ends... Without the cultural and technological contribution of these early, grassroot computer networks, the Internet would have looked very different.”—Manuel Castells<sup>81</sup>*

Unschooling and the Internet grew up together. But for some unschoolers, they were like family members who had a nasty falling out.

The mapping I’ve done through interviewing present day unschoolers does not quite lie flush on yesteryear’s topography. We can think of unschoolers as aligned with the New Communalists in that they move outside of the System and approach societal change as a paradigm-shift in consciousness of individuals. However, one of the unschoolers featured in Case Study #5, Matt and his unschooling-social-anarchist collective hold the urban community as its priority, not unlike the New Left. But at the same time, what qualifies as legitimate political action has changed. Unschooling artist-activist, Heather makes paper maché masks to wear at anti-globalism protests. Punk unschoolers make zines instead of buying into consumer culture. Unschooling teen, Vlad takes part in the open-source movement. While many unschoolers have gone back-to-the-land, it’s important to note that only some of them share the techno-enthusiasm of Turner’s New Communalists. Unschooling dad Jeremy lives with his family on a self-sustainable mini-farm, while he earns money as a computer programmer/system dynamics engineer. And yet, some unschoolers reject media and technology and turn to

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p.19 & 23. It’s also important to note that being in grad school kept many people from combat in Vietnam.

neo-Luddite lifestyles, being close to the earth and growing their own food. The Left's present day conceptions of what it means to be active on the political landscape have changed.<sup>82</sup> The very tools one wields to effect change have shaped that landscape.

Today, much of the tension in unschooling no longer looks how Kozol imagined it—urban vs. rural, or how Turner described it—New Communalist vs. New Left. Rather, in a world inextricably linked to the contradictions described by Castells, unschoolers mix and match leftist practices, drawing from various grassroots movements. If anything, unschoolers reconfigure these media practices in response to their conceptions of community, authenticity, and freedom—as either threatened or enhanced by media and technology, or something in between. All these ideas exist together, somewhat in a jumble, reflecting the Left's split into many little roots in a rhizome-like structure. The unschoolers' reconfiguration of media practices for learning—only watching science documentaries on TV for example, or being an early-adopter on a social networking website, or never using workbooks and quizzes—always relates in some way to their conceptions of dominant and oppressive mainstream ideology.

### **Narrativity: Creating an Alternate American Myth**

Public school contains—even for mainstream Americans—a schizoid. We hold up school as all-American. And yet, for some people, school only represents painful memories. Most of us also have at least some fond memories of a teacher with whom we bonded. For most Americans, the overwhelming memory is of boredom. In 1971, the

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<sup>82</sup> “One of the prominent ideas that came out of the tumult that was the New Left was the idea that the ‘personal is political,’ a notion best and most frequently articulated by the feminist movement...With this new definition, what could be considered within the realm of ‘the political’ was significantly expanded” (p. 28, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*).

“inadequacy of our schools has been so widely publicized and has affected so many Americans that ...few would disagree with the claim that reform is needed throughout the educational system. Yet most attempts at reform have failed.”<sup>83</sup> While some experimental programs have shown potential, no one claims that public schools are improving. And yet, something prevents most Americans from thinking outside the box and from a systemic change in philosophy.<sup>84</sup>

In 1977, in a letter John Holt wrote to then high schooler Susannah Sheffer, he told her “we are publishing a little magazine now,” *Growing Without Schooling*.<sup>85</sup> The unschooling movement can be said to have unofficially officially started. I say *unofficially officially* to underscore that the unschooling movement made the announcement of its birth differently from mass media. The movement proclaimed itself grassroots in an informal way. It’s important to realize the positioning that goes on when unschoolers identified as grassroots: in opposition to the dominant, hegemonic way of life. Many small grassroots movements linked together, overlapping. What this amounts to is best thought about as a general lifestyle, which has a set of culturally informed practices when it comes to media and technology. Unschoolers use grassroots media in their struggle for freedom and independent learning.

One of the central ways in which the subculture of unschooling opposes the mainstream is through their own retelling of the history of American schooling.

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<sup>83</sup> p.505, Ann Petrie, “Education Without Schools” a 1971 book review of *Deschooling Society* in *The Nation*.

<sup>84</sup> For example, Fred Carrigg in Union City, NJ rethought literacy at a local level and implemented change very successfully. Charter schools and small schools movement are exploring pedagogy that kids respond to more positively. Most unschoolers acknowledge that not all of school is bad. Grace Llewellyn writes, “I don’t want to deny that some teachers make wonderful things happen in school. I just know that the odds are way against them”(p.65, *Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education*). Most public school teachers, my mother included, describe frustration with the institutionalized bureaucracy that makes their real work difficult. And yet, reforms have only been ratcheting up standardization and testing from the federal level.

<sup>85</sup> p.vii, John Holt, *Growing Without Schooling: A Record of a Grassroots Movement*. Susannah was a precocious high schooler who read Holt’s work and struck up correspondence with him.

Unschoolers' alternative emplotment of the history of American schooling reveals a distrust of government and mainstream society. Illich re-narrates the myth of American public schooling. Within the movement there is an awareness and intentionality of this consciously oppositional narrativity.

*“Everyone learns in school how America, from early in the life of the Republic, puts schools at the heart of its democratic egalitarian promise...Illich takes note of this commitment and its revolutionary origins, but since he makes quite different assumptions about the present, he draws rather different conclusions about the past. The symbol is the same, but the story line is of an entirely different order...”—Colin Greer<sup>86</sup>*

Born of an oppositional discourse, the unschooling narrative becomes an alternate reality, which comments on the mainstream culture of media, school and lifestyle.

The key to starting to consider unschooling—what I refer to as the unschooling *paradigm-shift*—is in gaining a critical distance from what is seen as the mythology of American public schools. The process of storytelling becomes the grease on the gears of the decision to unschool. This emplotment inverts what most Americans would deem a crucial part of the American dream, and therein lies its compelling allure. In my conversations with present day unschoolers, their versions centered on John Taylor Gatto's *Underground History of the American Education*. This book looms large in unschooling, in all the anti-tech and pro-tech, rural and urban. Gatto's book came out in 2001, though his book *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* came out in 1992. Gatto has crystallized many of the various strands of grassroots critique and packaged it quite well. The book in its entirety is available for free on the Internet. Gatto's next project, along with filmmaker Roland Legiardi-Laura, is a documentary *The Fourth Purpose*, about the history of compulsory schooling. It's a cross between Ken Burns, in its ambition, and Michael Moore, in its punch. Currently,

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<sup>86</sup> p.78, Colin Greer in *After Deschooling, What?*



Gatto travels around the world speaking about unschooling at conferences, universities, and other gatherings. His popularity may be due in part to his innovative media approach, and in part to his intriguing persona. During the course of my research, almost every mention of his name was coupled with the fact that he was New York State Teacher of the Year before retiring in disgust.

Basically, Gatto claims that American public schools were not established for benign reasons. They were designed to produce subservient factory workers who would be good consumers during what little leisure time they have. He introduces whom he calls the “real” forefathers of American education: industrialists and corporate men of influence. He uses such words as “underground” and “hidden curriculum” in flirting with the idea of conspiracy:

*“With conspiracy so close to the surface of the American imagination and American reality, I can only approach with trepidation the task of discouraging you in advance from thinking my book the chronicle of some vast diabolical conspiracy to seize all our children for the personal ends of a small, elite minority. Don't get me wrong, American schooling has been replete with chicanery from its very beginnings: indeed, it isn't difficult to find various conspirators boasting in public about what they pulled off. But if you take that tack you'll miss the real horror of what I'm trying to describe, that what has happened to our schools was inherent in the original design for a planned economy and a planned society laid down so proudly at the end of the nineteenth century. I think what happened would have happened anyway—without the legions of venal, half-mad men and women who schemed so hard to make it as it is. If I'm correct, we're in a much worse position than we would be if we were merely victims of an evil genius or two.”—John Taylor Gatto<sup>87</sup>*

For unschoolers, Gatto's text lifts the wool from their eyes. This mirror-image world grows more real than the mythologized American public schooling. It has a wholeness with its detailed history—the frequent reference to the Prussian model imported by the

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<sup>87</sup> John Taylor Gatto, *The Underground History of American Education* (<http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/chapters/index.htm>).

U.S., for instance—and an integrity that serves as a backbone—for the love of children and our society!

### **Grassroots Media: Beyond Practical Toward the Cultural**

Why do the unschoolers use grassroots media besides the obvious and practical reasons? Christian homeschooling can be seen as grassroots as well but its media looks, feels, and operates in a much different manner. Is there something more? The aesthetic is important, but is there something beyond this? There is something integral to the unschoolers' cultural construction of media, which expresses their philosophical and political ideas about learning in everyday life. In defining themselves as “Other,” unschooling media producers empower themselves through grassroots media. But how does that defining take place through media? What are the internal affordances of unschooling media that make it coherent within this subculture? That make it conflict internally? Over the course of the late 60s through present, unschoolers have built a radical new discourse through DIY media, functioning as the antithesis of the System. How unschoolers produce, consume and distribute media crucially expresses philosophical notions of identity internally and to the world.

Essentially, at the time of the invention of the Internet and the emergence of unschooling, the road the Left traveled as it sought social, political, and cultural change split into many grassroots paths. One was blazed by ARPANET students and those who would, according to Turner, go on to form *WELL* and *Wired* Magazine. Kozol and urban activists continued engaging with the structure of the System through direct social change. Back-to-the-landers wondered off to change the world through dropping out and

tuning in conceptually and through a holistic lifestyle change. These strands can be plugged into to mix-n-match media practices used by unschoolers. They cannot, however, be thought of in terms of a continuum. For example, one cannot conclude that the more “anti-technology” you are, the more unschoolish you are. This results in a complicated map. Usually, unschoolers are aware of the contestations within unschooling: the debate over TV, the debate over the Internet, the debate over curricula textbooks, the debate over learning not through any media at all but only through doing...skateboarding, say. This thesis takes up these practices and analyzes their meaning through the *Five Unschooling Case Studies*.

## **Conclusion**

Current day unschoolers live in an incredibly diverse subculture, some might say linked only by the preponderance of idiosyncrasy. And yet, through my research, certain patterns in the cultural practices used in producing, consuming, and distributing media emerge. In the *Five Unschooling Case Studies*, I explore practices of learning to read, accessing media resources, mediated and direct social interactions, networking and accessing other people, researching, creative expression, sharing knowledge, analyzing cultural materials, and more. Unschoolers perform these practices in a participatory manner, thus giving meaning to the subculture and its media forms.

If we look back to the time of the 60s and 70s, we can see where these practices come from: the Left’s utopian visions of learning in a potential society and its dystopian counterpart, the public schools. Their attitudes would express “a decidedly ecumenical home education. They have done so according to the rules and with the resources of

‘alternative’ America—that fragile organizational network left after the ebb of liberal causes of the 1960s and 1970s. This is the world of alternative schools, progressive not-for-profits, food co-ops, and the occasional surviving commune that carry on the egalitarian ethos of the student movements and the counterculture. It is a small world now, short on cash, physical plants, and new blood, but still a hotly idealist and quietly optimistic place.”<sup>88</sup> This unschooling subculture sustains itself in part through its members’ fierce individualism and in part through grassroots media.

*“It is based on the reactivation of local knowledges—of minor knowledges, as Deleuze might call them—in opposition to the scientific hierarchization of knowledges and the effects intrinsic to their power: this then is the project of these disordered and fragmentary genealogies. If we were to characterize it in two terms, then ‘archeology’ would be the appropriate methodology of this analysis of local discursivities, and ‘genealogy’ would be the tactics whereby, on the basis of the descriptions of these local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which were thus released would be brought into play.”—Foucault<sup>89</sup>*

In this *History/Historiography*, I hope I have provided a useful “archeology” and “genealogy” of the roots of unschooling. In doing so I hope to have contributed to the awareness of their living history without imposing a rigid overlay—this would be contrary to the ethos of the subculture. The rest of this thesis takes up the modes of production, consumption, and distribution of unschooling media artifacts in relation to my theory of mix-n-match participatory practices. In these *Five Unschooling Case Studies*, I reveal how the contradictions and continuities in these media practices play out in the digital era, as the Left continues to struggle with ideas and actions pertaining to learning and identity, freedom, and community.

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<sup>88</sup> p.7, Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.

<sup>89</sup> p.205, Foucault, “Two Lectures” in *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*.

# **Unschooling Media: Five Unschooling Case Studies**

## Introduction to Five Unschooling Case Studies

Unschoolers have removed the formal structures established by the institution of school. The world of unschooling, then, is a dynamic space in which the practice of everyday learning continues to flow, morph, and spark debate. These case studies look at the situated performance of these practices. The type of thinking that I will be describing in these case studies takes place as “everyday” learning. We all—unschoolers and non-unschoolers—practice everyday learning, but unschoolers legitimize it as their primary engagement with information and the production of knowledge, while for the most part, mainstream schoolers do not. It is this deceptively simple difference that gets to the essence of why mainstream schoolers have difficulties understanding unschooling. I discuss the unschoolers’ conceptualization of these practices of everyday learning in terms of identity and in terms of what they define as learning, as opposed to schooling (or as John Holt put it *Instead of Education*).

This introductory section serves to situate readers before entering the world of unschooling, as I hope my case studies will allow them to do. My approach to media studies focuses on the human interactions enabled through media and by people’s attitudes towards media. In this way, writing about technological details aids in revealing the human decisions. For my purposes, these case studies are a way to bring the human aspect of media and technology to the forefront.

These case studies draw from my real experiences interviewing and doing fieldwork with unschoolers about their practices with and attitudes about media. From these, I analyze practices of unschoolers in order to reveal the dynamic, informal, and contentious structures of their subculture. My units of analysis range first focus in on the

parent and child and then move out to a neighborhood group, networks of geographically dispersed unschoolers, the encounter between unschoolers and myself as a researcher in school, and finally my unit of analysis zooms out to the subcultural level.<sup>90</sup> In many cases, I have used terminology and knowledge gained from my informants; in other cases, I have attempted to overlay metaphors onto the material I've collected. I've discussed these metaphors with my informants in order to confirm their applicability. As a qualitative researcher, I believe this methodology comes as close to a truthful representation as possible.

In this way, a truthful representation means familiarity, *knowing how and why*, while still keeping an analytical lens. As a researcher, I first entered this subculture with a fair amount of naïveté about what it means to be an unschooler. I've come to learn that there's a paradigm-shift one must undergo to really understand how unschooling takes place and why it's so important to unschoolers. As unschooling mom Beatrice told me, "There is no question that when you start unschooling, all your other preconceived notions, your attitudes, and thinking are called into question. When you unschool you can never again look at the world in the same way ..."<sup>91</sup> In this introduction, I hope to lead my readers through some of the preliminary questions I first had, and indeed many unschoolers had when they first considered this new way of life.

## **Normative Questions**

*To start with, to whom am I referring when I write "unschoolers"?* Unschooling mom Beatrice explains: unschooling "is an ongoing process- I believe it is an opportunity

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<sup>90</sup> For more on the process of writing this thesis, see *My Methodology* section.

<sup>91</sup> Beatrice and Randy's interview conducted over email, March 20, 2006.

to grow, to learn to thrive not just for the kids but even more importantly, for the adults who care for them.”<sup>92</sup> Both the children and the adults in this subculture consider themselves “unschoolers” and take part, in some capacity, in the media and technology practices. This relates to what Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger described as a “community of practice,” or what James Paul Gee referred to as “affinity groups” in which people of all ages take part.<sup>93</sup> One of the elements of “practice” as I define it, is that it’s ongoing.

*Do unschoolers feel misrepresented or misunderstood by the American people and mainstream press?* In general, yes. However, there’s a sense that as the movement grows, more people become familiar with what unschooling means. As unschooling mother Joyce told me when I asked about more recent mainstream representations of unschooling, “What I've seen shows a greater understanding from reporters. They are seeing homeschooling through its own lens rather than through the lens of school.”<sup>94</sup> As I’ve learned from using an ethnographic methodology, the evolving and generative process of questions and responses tells us much about the members of the subculture, the researcher, and the relationship between mainstream and subcultural identities. Much

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<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger discuss “communities of practice” in their book *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. They use the case studies of apprenticeships—Mexican midwives, African tailors, for example—to explore learning by doing through an anthropological lens. I was struck by the materiality and groundedness of Lave and Wenger’s analysis of these case studies. They wrote the book in 1991. James Paul Gee wrote *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy* in 2003. Gee’s work on “affinity groups” offers more insights into how intergenerational collaboration might be shaping the direction of new media and participatory practices related to informal and distanced learning. He “call[s] the group of people associated with a given semiotic domain—in [the case presented in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*] first-person shooter games—an *affinity group*. People in an affinity group can recognize others as more or less ‘insiders’ to the group. They may not see many people in the group face-to-face, but when they interact with someone on the Internet or read something about the domain, they can recognize certain ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing as more or less typical of people who are ‘into’ the semiotic domain”(p.27).

<sup>94</sup> I’m reminded of a segment at the *Learning in Our Own Way* conference, in which conference organizer Pat Farenga played a tape of the *Donahue* show, on which Holt along with other homeschoolers appeared in an early 1980s segment. The crowd of unschoolers gasped as they watched the 80s audience’s hostile reactions to Holt and the other guests. In this period, homeschoolers were fighting for the right to homeschool in the U.S. judicial system. Farenga showed the clip in order to honor the important role Holt played for the subculture, as an advocate, but also to show the conference-goers how far the subculture has come in being accepted by the mainstream. Joyce’s interview was conducted over email. This quote comes from an email dated March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006.



can be learned about a subculture by approaching and listening to its members on their own terms.

*Do unschooling parents hope their children's media use/production is educational?* When I first started this research, I was asking this question to unschoolers. Subsequently, I noticed that non-unschooling people ask me this question when curious about my research topic. The response I get from unschoolers is *you're asking the wrong question*. Unschoolers resist the language of education because it seeks to demarcate a desired result—to draw up one rubric for success.<sup>95</sup> In essence, I was asking, *does unschooling work as a methodology?* Joyce, an unschooling mom, explains:

*"I think unschoolers look at media (and the world!) differently than schoolers. Schoolers ask the question, 'How can I get this information into a child?' and see new media as a way of directing children's attention to what the educators want them to learn. Unschoolers ask the question, 'What are you interested in doing now?' and any learning happens as a side effect of exploring. New media just gives kids greater and easier access to what interests them. Unschooling isn't about getting math into a child. It's about children exploring real aspects of life and picking up and figuring out on the fly how to use the tools that will help them explore."<sup>96</sup>*

When you've re-conceptualized learning as something natural or even a spiritual practice, non-schoolers asking *does it work* misses the mark and in fact dehumanizes the process by quantifying it according to some—however a vague or unwritten—standard.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> The language of education also seeks to impose the terminology—a jargon—of educational professionals. Illich problematized the notion of “experts” and the professionalization of teaching which he felt anyone with skills to share should be able to do. I discuss the resistance I as a researcher got from unschoolers in my *Methodology* chapter and in Case Study #4.

<sup>96</sup> Joyce's interview was conducted over email. This quote comes from an email dated March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2006.

<sup>97</sup> In her dissertation, *To be Brave and Subversive Human Beings*, Olson discusses what she sees as central to the unschooling project—a humanist or even spiritual respect for learning. That said, it's worth noting that homeschoolers do as well if not relatively better than mainstream kids in college acceptance. According to a recent article in *EdWeek* about Advanced Placement tests, “[s]ince 2000, the number of home schoolers taking such [AP] exams has tripled, from 410 that year to 1,282 in 2005, according to data the College Board prepared at the request of Education Week. That growth is due in part to home schoolers who want to validate that they've learned challenging academic material, particularly if they are applying to competitive colleges...When John Calvin Young of Smithville, N.C., wanted to study for the AP U.S. government and politics exam, his mother, Melanie Young, selected a textbook and study aids. But they both believe the youth's involvement in two campaigns for Republican candidates during the fall of 2004 and other political activities helped him score a 5 on the exam. 'One of the harder parts of the AP government stuff for me was remembering the details behind the legislative process or behind specific legislation from the past,' said Mr.

However, I would like to stress here the ideological—and political—construction of this miscommunication, as exemplified by the above question/response. When unschoolers respond by reframing of the question—*is my child happy and does she love exploring*—it reminds me of the silent resistance of children as described by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*<sup>98</sup> and Herbert Kohl’s *Teaching the “Unteachable.”*<sup>99</sup> Olson writes about this body of literature as a form of critical theory akin to the work theorizing colonization.<sup>100</sup> As a subculture, unschoolers must defend their subculture and what they do. Keep in mind that homeschoolers have fought in the United States judicial system to avoid going to jail. To a certain extent, my question of *is it educational* puts unschoolers on the defensive. Unschoolers resist the dominant taxonomic structure, which they see as building linguistic traps meant to fit unschooling into some category of school. A few minutes after rejecting my *is it educational* question, the same unschooler would approach me and offer an anecdote about how her child learned to read—offering a story of how unschooling happens, on her own terms.<sup>101</sup> Thus my informants and I negotiated these socio-cultural power relationships through the very terminology of my ethnographic research.<sup>102</sup>

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Young”(p.12, Mary Ann Zehr, "More Home Schoolers Taking Advanced Placement Tests" in April 26, 2006, *EdWeek*).

<sup>98</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>99</sup> Herbert Kohl, *Teaching the “Unteachable.”*

<sup>100</sup> “Like Paulo Freire describing the instruction of oppressed peasants in Brazil, this was a brutal and uncomfortable picture of schooling in Harlem in the early 60s, or Boston in 1967. As Memmi underlined in a later work, racism is a cultural discourse that surrounds each person from childhood, the central function of which is dominance (Memmi, 2000). In Kohl and Kozol’s work, children were dominated both from without and within”(p.171, Kirsten Olson, *To be Brave and Subversive Human Beings*). Grace Llewellyn also writes about freedom in this way: “If you look at the history of ‘freedom,’ you notice that the most frightening thing about people who are not free is that they learn to take their bondage for granted...In fact, people within an oppressed group often internalize their oppression...”(p.39, *Teenage Liberation Handbook*).

<sup>101</sup> For a model of engaging with informants in a collaborative way, see Gerry Bloustein’s work *Girl making: a Cross-cultural Ethnography on the Processes of Growing up Female*.

<sup>102</sup> Please see the Susannah Sheffer’s discussion of the etymology of the word “unschooling” in the *History/Historiography* chapter of this thesis.

*Don't the kids just watch TV all day? That's what I would have done if I'd unschooled as a kid.* In this question/response we can see unschoolers'—indeed Americans' in general—anxiety about consumption of media, especially television. The unschooling literature often addresses these concerns, and this process serves as an initiation rite-of-passage and as a way to allay the fears of new unschoolers.<sup>103</sup> When I talk to new unschoolers or to old-timers about how they first heard about unschooling, they describe starting with a tentative observation rather than active expression of their ideas about education. This is the period of time in which new-comers often read the “canon” of unschooling books, particularly those of John Holt and the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, and/or lurk online. Most of the unschoolers I've talked to mention this as when unschooling first clicked for them.

Once they make that conceptual leap—the paradigm-shift, if you will—and start to think realistically about unschooling, then many new unschoolers start to dialogue with old-timers. These interpersonal conversations often take place on yahoo groups or RL support groups, where new-comers ask questions about legal issues, practical questions and how these relate to the experience of becoming deschooled. To a certain extent there are differences between kids who unschool their entire lives and kids who come to unschooling after, say, dropping out of high school. Unschoolers who have taken their kids out of school will seek reassurance from old-timers. They allay fears by saying that kids need to undergo a “detox” to get schoolish ways out of their systems: “[f]orget the lies school taught—forget that learning is separate from your life, that you can't teach

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<sup>103</sup> Such as in *Teenage Liberation Handbook* and numerous websites and chats. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger use the terms “newcomers” and “old-timers” to “analyze the changing forms of participation and identity of persons who engage in sustained participation in a community of practice...Rather than a teacher/learner dyad, this points to a richly diverse field of essential actors and, with it, other forms of relationships of participation”(p.56, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*).

yourself, that you are defined by your grades, and all other such nonsense. Detoxify. Purge.”<sup>104</sup> This may entail watching a ton of TV, having a bad attitude, being lazy and bored—until the kid realizes she's free. The metaphor of “detoxing” is useful when thinking about learning to practice new behavior within the context of a lifestyle change. Cain and Lave and Wenger, who wrote insightfully about situated learning in A.A. 12-step programs, point out the role of *storytelling* in such participation.<sup>105</sup> Narrativity and identity transformation combine similarly with unschooling newcomers. The subculture’s RL and online communities function to initiate practices, allay fears, and construct narrative patterns. These mechanisms contribute to the structure of the subculture.

*Ok, so I understand that unschooling is child-directed learning, but can kids really keep sustained interest in anything?* This question essentially exposes the curiosity non-unschoolers have about *what happens* when unschooling and *how unschoolers spend their time*. Unschoolers don’t follow a calendar and they don’t only take two-week vacations when the rest of society dictates it. The way unschoolers conceptualize time and space differs from and in some respects opposes a core mechanism through which modern society functions: technological time.<sup>106</sup> Unschoolers associate this with the

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<sup>104</sup> p.126, Grace Llewellyn, *Teenage Liberation Handbook*. Unschoolers (especially anti-tech unschoolers) tend to link school and certain media forms (most often TV) as mutually reinforcing bad behavior. Both the anti-tech unschoolers and many non-unschoolers frame certain media—TV, videogames, the Internet, you never hear books talked about in this way—as addictive. This is one of the core debates within unschooling and will be analyzed at length in the fourth case study.

<sup>105</sup> The obvious analogy of unschooling “detox” to Cain’s Alcoholics Anonymous case study is useful to me in that “the main business of A.A. is the reconstruction of identity, through the process of constructing personal life stories, and with them, the meaning of the teller’s past and future action in the world” (p.80, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*). Most of my interviews with unschoolers involved them *telling me their story* in such a way.

<sup>106</sup> In his chapter “The Nature of Time,” Kern describes “three pairs of opposing views: whether time was homogeneous or heterogeneous, atomistic or a flux, reversible or irreversible.” He writes of the “most momentous development in the history of uniform public time since the invention of the mechanical clock in the fourteenth century...the introduction of standard time at the end of the nineteenth century...the telegraph” and in tandem, the railroad (p.11). The economic, scientific, political and cultural factors that play a part in the institution of standard time relate, I feel, to the unschoolers’ resistance to what they see as the birth of corporate hegemony. As I discussed in the *History/Historiography* chapter of this thesis, unschoolers’ historiography narrates this resistance to standardization and arbitrary segmentation of the flow of everyday life by, most commonly referenced, *factory time*. Most unschoolers

dictates of the factory, and in a vernacular of Frankfurt school critical theory, resist technocratic time. In fact, Kim and Ken in their *Homeschool Habitat* podcast suggest making a holiday out of the so-called back-to-school season. Kim and Ken consider this season commercialized in marketers' attempts to "sell more backpacks and clothes."<sup>107</sup>



Carsie by her mural. (photo courtesy Carsie Blanton)

For them it exemplifies the arbitrary and rigid segmentation of the mainstream calendar. I think of this as a Bakhtinian carnivalization of the ritual of "back-to-school."<sup>108</sup> Llewellyn's *Not Back To School Camp* also practices this sort of inversion. Unschoolers play and poke fun with the mainstream's time markers.

*So what does this oppositional stance actually mean and how does it translate to the everyday practice of child-driven sustained interest? Rather than*

the dictates of a predetermined curriculum or sanctioned textbook, the unschooling

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would also reject the notion of the church bells dictating their lives in a small village, no doubt. My point is that unschoolers prefer personal construction of time and reject the notion that the family's life should be scheduled any outside hegemonic force, namely school. Or perhaps, unschoolers search for a conception of time reminiscent of one lost. "In *Primitive Classification* (1903) Durkheim mentioned in passing that time is closely connected with social organization, and in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912) he explored the subject in detail. There he distinguished between private time and 'time in general,' which has a social origin: 'the foundation of the category of time is the rhythm of social life'(p.19). This is one of the roots of mainstream society's suspicion of children who don't go to school and the assumption that unschoolers must be at some level "antisocial." I believe the present day unschoolers' resistance to public time is not unlike "the thrust of the age [Kern describes, which tried] to affirm the reality of private time against that of a single public time and to define its nature as heterogeneous, fluid, and reversible. That affirmation also reflected some major economic, social, and political changes of this period. As the economy in every country centralized, people clustered in cities, and political bureaucracies and governmental power grew, the wireless, telephone, and railroad timetables necessitated a universal time system to coordinate life in the modern world. And as the railroads destroyed some of the quaintness and isolation of rural areas, so did the imposition of universal public time intrude upon the uniqueness of private experience in private time... The sense of time throughout this period emerged from tensions and debates in physical science, social science, art, philosophy, novels, plays, and concrete technological change. In tracing its various modes of past, present, and future we will see other polarities over different issues, structuring the culture through conflict"(p.34-35, *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918*).

<sup>107</sup> *Homeschool Habitat* is available through iTunes or any podcasting software. <http://bradley.chicago.il.us/hh/>.

<sup>108</sup> "The 'carnival sense of the world,' as a process and a technical term, covers many interconnected ideas in Bakhtin. First, it is a view of the world in which all important value resides in openness and incompleteness. It usually involves mockery of all serious, 'closed' attitudes about the world, and it also celebrates 'discrowning,' that is inverting top and bottom in any given structure. Discrowning points symbolically to the unstable and temporary nature of any hierarchy"(p.443, Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*).

learning cycle follows how long a given topic holds the interest of the child and the extent to which the child's resources—books, people with specialized knowledge, other media forms—are exhaustible. I asked Carsie, the subject of Case Study #3 Carsie's Network: *Connecting a Geographically Dispersed Population*, for an example of project-based learning or child-led learning. I also asked how long the cycle lasted. Carsie responded with an anecdote from her childhood: marine biology interested her as a child. "I woke up one morning and asked my mom if I could paint a mural on my bedroom wall and she said yes. Over the next four years I covered the walls of my room with marine life and it was a study of how the animals would coexist."<sup>109</sup> This mural is a vivid example of unschoolers' different approach to time: time that expands and contracts according to lived experience. The unschoolers in the fifth case study, *Zines & Collective Participation*, make zines together, some for extended periods of time. I asked Daisy, an eight-year-old, how long it took to make one zine. She shrugged and said sometimes a few months.<sup>110</sup> Clearly, for her this question was not grounded as an important aspect of the project. Rather, it was important to her that the zine got made, resulting in enjoyable opportunity to now read it to me. On the other hand, unschoolers have talked with me about waiting until the child is ready and willing to tackle a new challenge and how this results in a quicker understanding when they do engage with the material. Mary, the mother from the first case study, Peter's Opera Record: *Haphazardly Accessing the Cabinet of Curiosity*, remarked that this has been the case with her son: "He'll only have to spend a few days on something that if he'd been forced to do it in school at an earlier

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<sup>109</sup> From a recorded phone interview with Carsie, March 10, 2006.

<sup>110</sup> Fieldwork with Daisy and her family the week of March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.

age—it would have taken him three months.”<sup>111</sup> Unschoolers offer these stories of efficiency as a way of ironically critiquing the systemization of school. Not only is school a factory, it’s an inefficient factory, which purports its efficiency. Overall, unschoolers let time expand and contract according to the child’s needs.

Unschoolers keep time *in close to themselves*. Time is contextualized by their RL lived experience (school would not be considered *real life*). Just where exactly they draw the perimeter lines, which context takes primacy—individual, family, community—continues to be a point of contention in the subculture. Unschooling time, then, is authored from within (again unschoolers debate whether the individual, the family or the community authors it). I believe those unschoolers who oppose technology wield the technocratic critique because they view Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) as a system engineered by controlling forces—such as society at large or corporations, federal government—which distances and disjoints the lived experience of time. Building off of Benjamin and Anderson’s discussions of “homogenous time,” Steven Jones writes that “the Internet’s insertion into modern life represents a further displacement, or divergence, between our sense of ‘lived’ time (the time that passes according to our senses, the time of ‘being’) and our sense of ‘social’ or ‘functional’ time (the time that we sense as a form of obligation...).”<sup>112</sup> We humans have only so much time per day. How we choose to spend this time and who tells us how to spend it must be one of the original political questions. This relates to one of the doubts Dewey had when he saw his own disciples trying to apply complete freedom in the classroom.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> From a recorded phone interview with Mary, December 11, 2005.

<sup>112</sup> p.13, Steven Jones, *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cybersociety*.

<sup>113</sup> See my description of Dewey’s split with more radical conceptions of learning, in the *History/Historiography* section of this thesis.

Unschoolers, on the other hand, believe in self-regulation. Grace Llewellyn touched on the civil liberties aspect of unschooling and I feel it relates to *how we spend our time and who dictates how we spend it*.<sup>114</sup> Thus unschoolers tackle an axis along which human societies organize themselves: time. In the *Five Unschooling Case Studies* I examine the way this materializes in their media practices.

*Aren't unschoolers limited by the resources they have in the home?* Again, a semiotic study of the terminology proves useful here. In the second case study, *Eli's Coop: A Civil War Role-play*, Eli's mom Sue breaks down the terminology because she feels it misleadingly emphasizes *the home*. She thus extends the discourse to the role of social space, which unschoolers actively seek outside the home, in the community, and for some, in cyberspace. Unschoolers re-conceptualize their environment and the way they access media and technology in their environment. Much of the first case study explores the unschoolers' re-conceptualization of another fundamental, human axis: space.

*Aren't unschoolers abandoning one of the last public spaces that binds us Americans together?* This is one aspect of unschooling that I find particularly troubling, because not all children have families and communities who advocate for them. Unschoolers are a self-selecting group that cares deeply about learning. Carsie, the unschooler featured in the third case study, admits that unschooling for everyone would only be possible “in an ideal world, where everyone has supportive families who help

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<sup>114</sup> While this thesis doesn't investigate the history of the unschoolers' battles in the justice system, arguments in unschooling texts and conversations often frame young people as treated unfairly under the law: “Regardless of what the law or your teachers have to say about this, you are as human as anyone over the age of eighteen or twenty-one. Yet, ‘minors’ are one of the most oppressed groups of people in the U.S., and certainly discriminated against legally”(p.41, Grace Llewellyn, *Teenage Liberation Handbook*).



with access to resources.”<sup>115</sup> And yet, unschoolers strongly believe that the vastness of the System’s power necessitates a move outside the mainstream. It’s not just that unschoolers believe public schools aren’t up to snuff; they don’t believe in the basic premise of schooling (as opposed to the idea of learning in everyday life). When one philosophically disagrees to such an extent, trying to change the System from the inside becomes a moot point. Unschoolers see social change happening through grassroots means precisely because of the insidiousness of the System. Drawing similar conclusions, Benedict Anderson wrote that colonization happened on “such a deep level that almost everyone...was unconscious of the fact. It had all become normal and everyday. It was precisely the infinite quotidian reproducibility of its regalia that revealed the real power of the state.”<sup>116</sup> When applying this quote to schooling, the regalia would be the textbook, standardized testing, not being allowed to pee without asking permission, etc. As we shall see in these case studies, unschoolers are very much concerned with social interactions and community. They just don’t agree that compulsory institutions are the correct way to foster these elements of society.

## **Conclusion**

Such normative questions lead us through at least a superficial orientation to the world of unschooling. In these *Five Unschooling Case Studies*, I explore the meaning generated through participatory media practices. “Meaning is central to the socio-cultural approach to mediated action...precisely because the notion of mediation is central. The processes and structures of semiotic mediation provide a crucial link between historical,

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<sup>115</sup> From a recorded phone interview with Carsie, March 10, 2006.

<sup>116</sup> p.182-3, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

cultural, and institutional contexts on the one hand and the mental functioning of the individual on the other.”<sup>117</sup> Thus, through this close analysis of unschooling media, we come to gain a deeper understanding of learning in everyday life as well as the crucial roles grassroots media plays within this particular subculture.

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<sup>117</sup> p.67, James Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*.

**Case Study #1**  
**Peter's Opera Record:**  
*Haphazardly Accessing the Cabinet of Curiosity*

**Introduction**

In this case study, I put forth the child's purchase of an old opera record as an event that reveals notions of unschooling identity and the social structure within the family and the neighborhood. The unschoolers re-conceptualize the world-outside-of-school as full of resources. Thus through the living-learning experience, unschoolers negotiate access to tools for learning. My guiding metaphor while analyzing this case study is *cabinets of curiosity*.<sup>118</sup> Unschoolers view the world as a plentiful array of "evocative objects," as Sherry Turkle says, and in interacting with them, an unschooler builds knowledge and lateral thinking skills.<sup>119</sup> Analysis of this case study also focuses on the naturalized scaffolding of the parent when helping to provide "access to tools," in the spirit of Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*.<sup>120</sup> Further, these practices reproduce an unschooling ideology in which the individual child learns *how* to negotiate space and access to his own desired tools for learning. Through modeling his parents and the subcultural community, the unschooling child learns to value the jumbled yard sale space and his dynamic, happenstance relationship with it.

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<sup>118</sup> This metaphor was inspired by Shirley Teresa Wajda's chapter "'And a Little Child Shall Lead Them': American Children's Cabinets of Curiosities" in *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America* (ed. Leah Dilworth). Dilworth introduces the chapter by saying Wajda explores the "symbiotic relationship between collecting and reading as mutual forms of inquiry in children's culture. She considers cabinets of curiosities, both textual and artifactual, as exemplifying Americans' uneasy 'relationship to both the material and the spiritual worlds' in the years between the early republic and the Progressive era" (p.9, Dilworth, foreword to *Acts of Possession*). While Wajda's chapter deals with a different era and therefore with different cultural and religious norms, I believe that her chapter brings up similar philosophical and education questions to those I'm asking about the unschoolers' experiences with thinking with and about objects. Seymour Papert also writes about "objects to think with" in *Mindstorms: Children, Computers, and Powerful Ideas*.

<sup>119</sup> Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. See also Agnes Varda's documentary *Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse (The Gleaners and I)*, for more on this way of interacting with the physical world.

<sup>120</sup> See the *History/Historiography* chapter for more on the influence of the *Whole Earth Catalog* on liberal culture and media.

Unschoolers realign social power relationships between the parent, other “authoritative adults” and the child.<sup>121</sup> These reconfigured power relationships manifest themselves in the child’s lived experience with media and accessing that media. Inspired by Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways with Words*, I use the early and pre-literacy practices of parent and child to theorize the way socio-cultural ideology informs unschooling.<sup>122</sup>

In school, the dynamic is such that a teacher attempts to input information into the students. In unschooling, the child pursues information according to her interest, and in becoming aware of the abundance of information, undertakes the enjoyable process of the hunt. This experience of learning is actually the pleasure of freedom in dialogic demonstration and performance of the knowledge through speech and action.<sup>123</sup>

## Background

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<sup>121</sup> At first glance, it may appear that I’ve framed this case study on the child-parent dyad. However, because I analyze unschooling using Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s theory of *situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation*, it does not make sense for me to halt at this dyad. Lave and Wenger emphasize the social group and larger cultural context within which learning takes place. With this case study, I use the individual child as a starting point and move outward from there.

<sup>122</sup> In her book *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, Shirley Brice Heath does a linguistic anthropological study comparing families’ informal literacy practices in the home. Because her study designated different towns with differing socio-economic and ethnic populations, she was able to draw conclusions about how public education methods are naturalized to favor white, middle class kids and their genres of literacy and narrativity. She explores cultural capital of the mainstream kids’ leisure time as well (student government, sports, music lessons, Boy Scouts, etc) providing an interesting contrast to my research: “For most of them, activities out of school are as rigorously planned and scheduled as their participation in daily school classes. In the extracurricular lives their parents plan for them, they learn appropriate ways of getting ahead and displaying individual prowess and accomplishment. These ways of improving practice and performance are mingled with opportunities for learning what it means to be a member of a group and to choose, work with, and strive to be a group leader....”(p.242).

<sup>123</sup> I use Bakhtin’s notion of *speech genres, active understanding, and ventriloquism* to theorize unschooling. This action of relating to text underscores the interrelationship between the learner and his immediate social circle as well as the body of knowledge he taps. “Bakhtin criticizes the misleading aspects of traditional diagrams of communication, the best known of which is the complex ‘telegraphic’ model formulated by Saussure...”(p.128, Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*). Instead, Bakhtin puts forth a dialogic theorization of communication, in which “[e]ach act of real, ‘active understanding’ is much more complicated than that. The listener must not only decode the utterance, but also grasp why it is being said, relate it to his own complex interests and assumptions, imagine how the utterance responds to future utterances and what sort of response it invites, evaluate it, and intuit how potential third parties would understand it. Above all, the listener must go through a complex process of *preparing a response* to the utterance”(p.127-8, *ibid.*). Similarly, the field of fan studies seeks to reveal these relationships between the individual, the group, the body of media texts, and the meaning generated through their interactions. See Jenkins *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

Mary and her husband Mike unschool their two boys. In Woodstock, NY, they “were living up on a mountain. I mean, we had electricity, but we never had a TV or a computer. We had quite a bit of land. There are a lot of unschoolers up there so there’s a nice community. A lot of time was spent outdoors exploring things. There were a lot of artists and musicians and people who’d traveled...”<sup>124</sup> The family now resides in Long Island where Mary attends graduate school as a biology student. Mary’s husband Mike restores antique musical instruments and at this point stays at home with the kids during most days while Mary attends university. They have two boys: Peter who is eleven and Richard who is seven. The family has been unschooling “since before Peter was born.” Mike was the one who first suggested not sending their children to school, and Mary started reading John Holt and “it just felt so right...When we had the baby, we just continued and it’s a natural progression.” Mary described her husband as an “unschooler. He went to school and he had never heard of the term, but his nature and how he learns...He’s an unschooler.” Mary and her family represent a common unschooling identity paradigm. The notion of what it means to be unschoolers very much infuses the family’s identity. At the same time, the flexibility with the terminology represents a fluid linguistic play with identity and labels that I’ve noticed with most of my informants. For Mary, becoming an unschooler involved a bit of a shift in consciousness.<sup>125</sup>

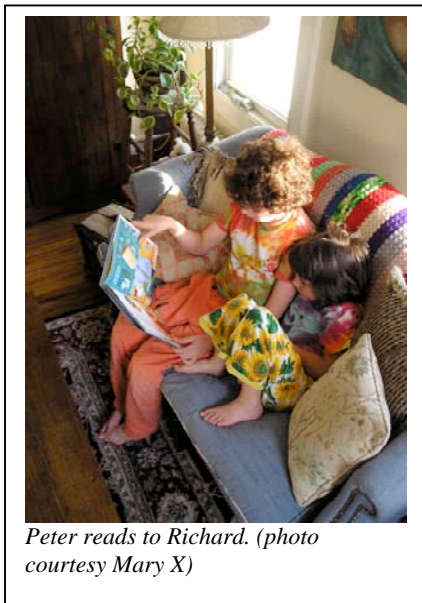
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<sup>124</sup> I found Mary through a friend of a friend who is a grad student with her. All quotes here come from our Dec 11, 2005 phone interview and subsequent emails. I asked Mary to email photographs and tell the stories behind the photographs.

<sup>125</sup> I address this paradigm-shift in relation to unschooling identity in the *Introduction to the Five Unschooling Case Studies*.

Mary talked about the challenges of unschooling and frames this as part of her learning curve in becoming an unschooler herself. “Reading came later [with Peter] than I would have liked. I had to force myself to hold back and let him do it, go at this own pace. He didn’t start reading until seven and a half, which is a bit late—later than I remember reading. He went from no reading to reading pretty mature books for a seven and a half year old...They both like the idea of reading books that are thick, [that are] not in the kids’ section of the library. They want me to read *The Hobbit* to them...”

Unschoolers believe that kids should first have the *desire* to read before they undertake



the activity.<sup>126</sup> Mary and her husband read to the kids before the kids were able to read, but they “don’t push” formalized activities. Mary feels she must suppress her worry and trust that reading will come about “organically.” We can view this as Mary’s transformation into an unschooler herself, as she comes to trust the practice of *learning to read* in an unschoolish way. Peter learns supportive literacy

practices before he learns to read on his own terms. Now that Peter knows how to read, he “reads a lot to Richard. Sometimes it’s a really good book he wants to share with him...sometimes he needs a little bit of encouragement. We all read a lot out loud...books on tapes are a big part of our life as well.”<sup>127</sup> In this case, the practices revolve around

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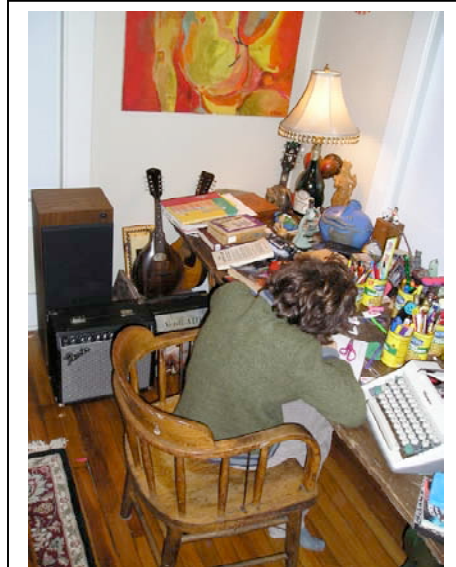
<sup>126</sup> Selena, an unschooling mom featured in Case Study #5, describes how many of the kids she’s known over the years have learned to read and write through the practice of making zines. For more on zines and social practice of making these handmade DIY magazines, see Case Study #5. Eli, the child I focus on in Case Study #2 learned to read because he landed a lead part in a play and had to memorize lines. Rob and Lizette’s son Enzo learned to read because he was fascinated by Japanese manga he found in a bookstore. Their older daughter went through a period of obsession with newspapers. The unschooling subculture is full of such stories.

<sup>127</sup> From an email with Mary, April 18, 2006.

notions of identity—being mature enough to desire chapter books and to share reading in a supportive way which scaffolds other family members’ pre-literacy.

### **Peter’s Opera Record**

When I ask for an example of this type of learning according to the child’s interests, Mary remarks that although Peter may be behind other kids his age in some subjects, “he’s way ahead in other things. I mean he knows more than I do about history and literature and about opera.” I asked Mary to describe Peter’s interest in opera, which I consider a type of project- or interest-based learning. “Felix [Mendelssohn], Story of 100 Operas... We had that book in our bookshelf... Why he originally was interested in that book is uncertain. I think it has to do with its



*Peter at a desk, with his favorite typewriter, opera records in the background. (courtesy Mary X)*

physical appearance--it is compact and antique looking.”<sup>128</sup> From that encounter with the book in their home, Peter made a connection to opera in the neighborhood:

*“We went to a yard sale when he was about five and he saw an opera record. He just liked the cover of it, so he got it and he liked it. Then when we went to another garage sale, he asked the people for opera records. They were so pleased that this little kid was asking for opera records that they gave him a whole bunch. Then he got these opera books and once he started reading, he started reading everything about opera. Now we have opera festivals in the house where we dress up as our favorite opera stars...I didn’t know anything about opera before! The more he knew, the more people would talk to him about it and I think he enjoyed that. He listens to it all the time, on headphones mostly. He’s so unique...He’ll spend a while with the Russian and the German tapes and he has dictionaries from any language imaginable. He listens to the foreign language tapes at the*

<sup>128</sup> From an email with Mary, April 18, 2006.

*library quite a bit. It's pretty neat...I've never heard him say he's bored. Never.*"<sup>129</sup>

Peter is now eleven and his interest in opera continues.

This case study demonstrates themes I've noticed while interviewing my other unschooling informants. Firstly, unschoolers handle text and the practice of learning to read in particular ways. Unschoolers re-conceptualize the social dynamic of power and authority between parents and child. *Teaching a child to read* as an imposed and definable course of instruction is reconfigured into *the child learning to read*. Thus the power of the parent must be dissipated and as Mary remarked, this creates some degree of discomfort for concerned parents. An unschooling parent fears that the child would come to reject the media object—in this case *text*—if it is imposed upon him as a compulsory task. In this way, Peter's unschoolish engagement with opera *on his own terms* can be taken as a manifestation of a de-hierarchical practice. It dismantles the school's institutional framework of learning to read, with its attending power relationships which coat, taint or otherwise spoil text and the act of reading for many children.<sup>130</sup> The radical thinkers of the 60s and 70s—namely Freire, Illich, Dennison, Holt, Kohl, Kozol—advocated for a complete re-conceptualization of learning along these lines.<sup>131</sup>

While Mary's family reconfigures these power dynamics with text, Mary and her husband do not simply disappear. This sort of slippage—people assuming the child just

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<sup>129</sup> From an phone interview with Mary, December, 11, 2005.

<sup>130</sup> Unfortunately, through a complex set of factors, many kids come to think that reading isn't cool or that they're not smart enough to read. James Wertsch examines the speech genre within a discourse that took place within the context of formal schooling. He lays out the characteristics of this speech genre. "The first of these is that there is a clear power difference between the voice of the teacher and the voices of the students. This is reflected in the fact that a large portion of the teacher's utterances are 'directives' (Hickmann and Wertsch, 1978), which the students are expected to follow, whereas the students produce very few directives for the teacher. Directives need not be in the syntactic form of an imperative; in many instances they will be in interrogative or even declarative form. Their general function is to regulate students' mental processes (such as thinking or attention) in ways that are appropriate for the sociocultural setting of the classroom. The general reason for using so many of them is to provide a foundation of regulative utterances that can be mastered and internalized by the students themselves"(p.112, *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*) This is precisely the type of speech genre that unschoolers avoid for philosophical reasons. To "regulate students' mental processes" flies in the face of unschoolers' notion of freedom.

<sup>131</sup> For more on the emergence of the unschooling movement, see the *History/Historiography* chapter.



*does his own thing*—comes about because unschooling appears so radically different from the school setting. However naturalized, the parents play crucial roles. Their social roles as facilitators come into play when providing access to resources. Mary and Mike have a house full of music and books. They bring the kids to yard sales and it was on this occasion that Peter discovered his first opera record. They supported Peter by providing the money for him to buy the record. They brought him to more yard sales where he would now intentionally search for opera records and seek out other opera fans to converse with. While it was Peter's idea in the first place, the whole family participates in the role-playing of favorite opera singers.<sup>132</sup> Mary admits with pride that she didn't know anything about opera before Peter taught her things. She played a role as a listening learner as Peter shares his knowledge about opera. Mary and Mike act as facilitators helping their children gain access to media objects, people and places. They also participate with the children in everyday learning—often with the child “teaching.” In these ways, unschooling families play integrated, supporting roles in each member's learning.

Unschoolers' flexible use of media objects opens up a space for the expression of identity. Mary's kids want to read chapter books, and this expresses an aspirational extension of their personalities. This may well have been stifled in another family or in the school setting. Peter's interest in opera also expresses his personality. Unschoolers value being “unique.” Oftentimes, people's dismay over peer pressure and conformity triggers decisions to leave school. Through the media objects of opera records, Peter gains access to social keys that unlock doors to other people—often older, more knowledgeable opera fans at yard sales. Thus the way the kids use media not only

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<sup>132</sup> For more on the social practice of improvisation, see Case Study #2 Eli's Coop: *A Civil War Role-play*.

expresses their desired aspects of themselves—being mature and worldly—but the kids also use those media objects as social networking tools.<sup>133</sup> “The operas [Peter] chose [to rent on DVD] were the ones he thought would also appeal to our younger son, Richard,” Mary remarked.<sup>134</sup> Clearly, Peter hopes to cultivate another opera fan in the household, another person to share his interest and enthusiasm. Peter also attempts to initiate his younger brother into the practice of becoming an opera fan. Mary’s family engages in the social practice of learning.

The way unschoolers access media resources and people underscores the importance they place on *authenticity*. When unschoolers re-conceptualize the world around them, they see an abundance of real life resources.<sup>135</sup> To offer a metaphor, they see the world as a *cabinet of curiosities*, those medieval precursors to museums in which special, interesting objects were collected together, arranged in unexpected, relatively un-taxonomic ways. The parent does not pre-determine the path but rather plays a role in making sure to clutter the path with interesting objects, people and opportunities. In response to that question which unschoolers come to dread—“What do you use for curriculum?”—author and homeschooling dad David Guterson offers this piece of text in his book *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense*:

*“What else? An ant farm, a bug jar, pair of field glasses, a rabbit cage, old appliances to take apart. An aquarium, a terrarium, a metronome, a collection of petrified wood and another of shells, a globe a magnifying glass, a calculator, a microscope. Felt pens, watercolors, magnets, dry-cell batteries, paper airplane kits... And time to ponder all of them. To read information on the back of baseball*

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<sup>133</sup> Social networking and access to people with specialized knowledge will be discussed further in the third case study.

<sup>134</sup> From an email with Mary, April 18, 2006.

<sup>135</sup> While authenticity here means situated in real life, some anti-tech unschoolers add the caveat of *organic* or *material* to their notion of authenticity. For more on the socio-cultural aspects of such aesthetics see the third and fifth case studies, which deal with DIY aesthetics. The practices of reuse and recycling are popular with unschoolers because of the liberal ideology that opposes mass-production and consumerism, in addition to their cheapness (most unschoolers seek out bargains due to the fact that often one parent stays at home with the kids and the families get by on a single income).

*cards, dig butter clams, dye rice paper, weave on a miniature table loom. To plant potatoes, tell tall tales, watch birds at the feeder, to fashion a self in silence... And visits to the Mack Gallery, the Grand Coulee Dam, the Ballard Locks, the Marine Science Center, the Museum of Flight*<sup>136</sup>

I transcribe Guterson here at length because I think of this quote as a textual version of the *cabinet of curiosity*, a cornucopia full of objects and resources.

The space of the home is like a *cabinet of curiosities*. Mary remarks, “Peter doesn’t take formal music lessons but our house is filled with instruments, stringed mostly, that he plays. He sings continually—he can really belt it out in public bathrooms.”<sup>137</sup> Unschooling dad David described this as “throwing books at my kids and seeing what sticks.”<sup>138</sup> Unschoolers prefer books and other media objects not already filtered or formatted for learning purposes, such as textbooks. These “evocative objects” as Sherry Turkle calls them, draw an unschooler in, provide depth and make connections outwards to fields of knowledge, emotional experiences, and social interactions.<sup>139</sup> Media objects such as textbooks and workbooks carry negative connotations of social control, segregation of academic disciplines, predetermined segmentation of information according to age or ability. Unschoolers’ homes are not devoid of “educational materials”; rather, unschoolers redefine what constitutes “educational materials.”

It’s not just the authenticity of the media objects themselves that matters, but also the way they are situated and encountered. Peter’s discovery of the opera record at the yard sale exemplifies an unschooling practice because it hinged on the chance encounter

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<sup>136</sup> p.33-4, David Guterson, *Family Matters: Why Homeschooling Makes Sense*. This connects to text instantiations of clutter in zines, discussed in the fifth case study. In particular, Stephen Duncombe, author of *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, writes about Mike the author of *Factsheet Five*, a digest zine that collects listings of other zines. “Early on, Mike saw the potential of *Factsheet Five* to cross-fertilize the different strands of underground publishing happening in the early 1980s, and in its earlier years zine listings in *FS5* were not categorized by genre, much less alphabetically...Part of the objection [by readers to organization and categorization], Mike explained, had to do with the familiar distrust of *any* order. But people were also enjoying the crossover the lack of genre categories encouraged”(p.51, Duncombe’s emphasis).

<sup>137</sup> From an email with Mary, April 18, 2006.

<sup>138</sup> From a February 18, 2006 phone interview with David Friedman.

<sup>139</sup> Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*.

at a rich site full of real objects, clustered with the potential for social interactions.

Unschooling mom and prolific writer, Sandra writes about this intentionally haphazard way of encountering evocative objects. She coined the term “strewing”—as in strewing a path with rose petals.<sup>140</sup> Combining the excitement of chance with real objects increases the likelihood of sparking an unschooling child’s interest. I spoke with Sandra about my theory of the unschooling world as a *cabinet of curiosity*. Sandra thinks the Exploratorium-type museums are a good analogy to her house and the way they unschool. The unschooling conception of the world and their homes is similar to current day museums’ move toward more experiential interaction with visitors: the unschooling relationship with objects and resources is dynamic, not static. “People don’t notice what’s always there. That’s part of strewing...There’s something fluid about life—if you want it to be. If the priority is learning, then changing things around, putting things away, taking things out” becomes part



of the everyday practice of unschooling. Sandra’s description of her house is revealing: “We don’t spend money on new couches. If someone’s real priority is that their house be ready for *House Beautiful* photographers everyday, this would be hard for them. They’re not going to leave something out. They’re not going to stick up a map of their state in the living room... You’ll need art supplies, you’ll need music... You have to have that stuff for kids to mess around with. And so our house has a lot of stuff. The kids all have their

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<sup>140</sup> I interviewed Sandra over the phone on December 14, 2005, with subsequent emails and IM chats. Sandra’s family is the focus of Case Study #4. Much of her writing can be found at <http://www.sandradodd.com>.

own rooms with their collections. And they each have their computers...” Unschoolers appreciate the dynamic pleasure of happenstance.

The unschoolers develop lateral thinking skills. “If you leave a microscope out on a table, kids will use it...Especially now with Google...if you leave something out, they’ll play with it. We have *Schoolhouse Rock!* on DVD. The concept behind *Schoolhouse Rock!* is that if kids can remember advertising jingles, they can remember their multiplication tables...You can only learn when it sticks to something you already know, kind of like a protein string. It’s just connection connection connection. It’s a web of information and it’s personal. Schools try to build the same patterns in everyone.”<sup>141</sup> The practice of lateral thinking, then, prioritizes the individual: it’s customized thinking. It revels in the idiosyncratic.

## **Conclusion**

By focusing here on the parent-child dyad, I’ve discussed some of the ways in which unschoolers practice *everyday learning*. Because such learning is so naturalized, it is most often invisible to Americans. Unschooling, for practicing parents and children, presents a challenge: how to keep it “organic” and yet be conscious of it enough to be responsive. In speaking about their roles as parents, unschooling parents tend obscure or deemphasize themselves. This is particularly important to acknowledge, given the socio-cultural norm of taking women’s labor for granted. Mitchell Stevens wrote of the typical unschooling “[m]other’s invisibility [which] is partly the result of a child-centered pedagogy. John Holt’s written work repeatedly encourages parents to put faith in children before their own efforts. Holt’s unschooling requires no particular teacher, no

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<sup>141</sup> From an phone interview with Sandra, December, 14, 2005.

particular educational setting. ‘This book is about ways we can teach children, or rather, *allow them to learn,*’ Holt wrote in *Teach Your Own...*”<sup>142</sup> While Stevens sees this as Holt “subtly making teaching a passive endeavor,” I see this as a blurry space in which parents, children and the unschooling community attempt to articulate their re-conceptualization of learning.<sup>143</sup> Clearly, there’s a lot of confusion, for parents and for researchers about just what takes place, however naturalized or defended with overcompensation. The practice of “strewing” stands as an example of a practice, which negotiates this tension. Emulating, to a much less rigorous extent, the approach of Brice Heath, I have attempted to reveal hidden practices of unschooling parents and children.<sup>144</sup>

I offer the metaphor of the *cabinets of curiosity*. I use this metaphor to conjure an image of the somewhat abstract notion of how unschoolers access media and resources in their environments. Unschoolers view the world as full of resources: mediated information, people with specific knowledge, places to visit outside of the school context, etc. Unschoolers hold the *authentic* object in high regard. I offer specific examples of how they organize their houses with access to tools. I also use *cabinets of curiosity* as a way to make a point about lateral thinking. Unschoolers value the role of happenstance in finding materials that interest them and the skill, which they exercise here is lateral thinking—making connections between juxtaposed information and objects. It’s a form of customized thinking,

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<sup>142</sup> p.88, Mitchell Stevens, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*.

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> The mainstream townspeople whose children do very well in school, “like the parents in Roadville and Trackton [whose children don’t achieve as much], have a strong ethos of wanting their children to get ahead and of depending on the school to play a critical role.” But Brice Heath reveals differences in the mainstreamers’ practices that “draw school activities and values back into the home and into the voluntary association network in which their children share...”(p.350) Children who are successful in school are those whose family life integrate information from school into the practice of everyday life, making connections in the environment which spark interest in the child.

I address the collaborative nature of *cabinets of curiosity* in unschooling. Sandra's theory of "strewing" highlights the role of the parent, both in the support they provide children and how they reproduce enthusiasm for *happenstance*. While often remaining naturalized and invisible, the parents play crucial roles in facilitating access to the world at large and to media tools, which dehierarchize the process of accessing knowledge. Instead of school, unschoolers renegotiate the practice of learning among the social group, in this case, the family. Interest- or project-based learning and speech genres, which are quite different from those found in school, can be thought of as opening up a dialogic text. Lateral connections to fields of knowledge, other media objects, and social experience become generative practices in the supportive dialogical interplay between family members.

**Case Study #2**  
**Eli's Coop:**  
*A Civil War Role-play*

**Introduction**

While I write this case study through the eyes of an unschooling child named Eli, I focus on his social group—the unschooling “coop”—as the unit of analysis. I first introduce the workings of the coop. I then do a close analysis of a role-playing activity in which Eli participates. The coop refers to these activities as “bursts.” I discuss this event as a necessarily social event. I analyze how the coop, as an audience-participant collective, supports unschooling ideology of identity and learning.<sup>145</sup>

In this case study, I use the event of a Civil War role-playing burst to explore unschooling practices of knowledge gathering and improvising. Further, I use Bakhtin’s dialogic theory to analyze the production and sharing of knowledge in the group setting of such an event.

**Background**

Eli keeps tossing his long, brown hair out of his eyes. He is a bright, kind eleven-year-old, with a husky voice and energetic demeanor. He has been unschooling his whole life. During the cold February 2006 evening I spent with him, his mother Sue S and his father Marc G at their home, Eli would pop up and help bring food to the table, dart out to get items to show me.<sup>146</sup> At one point when we were talking about the workshops—or “bursts” as they call them—he’d done, Eli went over to a bookshelf in the living room.

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<sup>145</sup> Again, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s theory of *situated learning in legitimate peripheral participation* is useful to consider how this coop comes together in “bursts” as a community of practice. The families not only want to learn about history in an experiential way, but they also concern themselves with unschooling in an enjoyable, effective way.

<sup>146</sup> My methodology with this family involved meeting and talking with Sue at the *Learning in Our Own Way Conference* in August 2005, ongoing emails, an evening with the family at their home February 5, 2006, and more emails and sharing of photos.



He plucked one of the clay characters he'd kept from a favorite burst—a claymation class with his unschooling coop. He brought it over to me and told me that one of the most important things he'd learned from the experience was “Patience!” He then went on to explain how stop motion animation works: “The more pictures you take as, you know, a car moves across the screen, the slower it turns out in the movie.”<sup>147</sup> Sue and Eli emphasized the personality of the claymation teacher, Todd, as one of the crucial reasons why the kids enjoyed the class. He was particularly “fun—more like a kid,” as Eli put it, and the kids could relate to him. This sort of hands-on learning, the potential for personal expression—these aspects of learning with media clearly made an impact on Eli. But Eli enjoyed the social aspects of the burst as well. These sorts of relationships would come to provide the loose structure and motivation for much of Eli's unschooling.

The family is part of what they call their homeschooling “coop,” an informal organization of local families, which has become fully integrated into their lives. From the success of the claymation burst, the homeschooling families started actively planning other bursts and activities together. When I first met Sue at the *Learning in Our Own Way* conference put on by Pat Farenga of Holt Associates in August of 2005, her family had been in the coop for five years.<sup>148</sup> I'd been struck by the interest with which she listened to me speak about my research. The family lives in Jamaica Plain, MA, a neighborly part of Boston, infused with a mild dose of counterculture. Marc is an RN, and they met when Sue was working as a health care researcher. Currently, she's a teacher at a local, parent cooperative nursery school, where Eli went for 3 years. Sue said she

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<sup>147</sup> From fieldwork, February 5, 2006.

<sup>148</sup> <http://www.learninginourownway.com/>.

first heard about unschooling through the staff at this school—people who were interested in pursuing alternative educational options.

From Todd’s claymation class, the kids and parents started organizing a loose schedule. Parents would rotate hosting the kids at their houses and doing activities along different themes. For example, one mother really enjoys writing and so she’s been hosting the writing burst every Wednesday for years. I told Sue about some fieldwork I’d done in December 2005 at Ken Danford’s North Star Learning Center for Teens, in Hadley, MA.<sup>149</sup> North Star is a place where homeschooling teens can congregate with each other, connect with mentors, suggest topics for classes and get help organizing them. Nothing at North Star is compulsory and there’s no grading. Sue responded that her unschooling coop functions a lot like that, though most of the kids in their coop are of middle school age. For North Star and Eli’s coop, legitimate participation comes from a sense of interest and engagement within the context of a community, rather than required, institutionalized modes of participation.

In part, this sense of community results in what people growing up and into more enriched roles. Lave and Wenger called “newcomers becoming old-timers.”<sup>150</sup> For instance, after his presentation about attending North Star at the *Learning in Our Own Way Conference*, I chatted with Vlad, a blonde pony-tailed, mature unschooler in his late teens. I’d been impressed by Vlad’s eloquence when describing how he was able to pursue his interest in the open-source movement while a teen at North Star. Vlad told me that he returned to North Star to offer a class to the other kids about the philosophy and production of open-source software and Linux machines. Though far different from the

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<sup>149</sup> p.56, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*.

<sup>150</sup> North Star Learning Center for Teens (<http://www.northstarteens.org/>).

sort of institutions Pierre Bourdieu wrote about in *Reproduction in Education*, unschooling has voluntary mechanisms for reproducing itself. This sort of volunteerism, which unschoolers hold up as an ideal of authenticity, is only possible when people are truly free to come and go as they please. On the other hand, this sort of freedom can make the whole coop endeavor somewhat tenuous. Sue sadly remarked on the downside of sustaining their coop with a critical mass of people: as many of the kids reach high school age, the parents and kids “get nervous” that they’re not working up to the teen’s academic potential. These doubts lead to enrolling in schools and abandoning the coop. Sue worries this will happen with Eli’s cohort once they reach high school age. In this way, unschoolers grapple with notions of individualism and responsibility to their communities.

With this case study, the concept of *community* comes to the forefront.<sup>151</sup> I’ve discussed the crucial function of terminology in this subculture in the *History/Historiography* chapter of this thesis—“unschooling” vs. “homeschooling.” Sue told me that she’d rather call what they do “community learning” more than “homeschooling or unschooling.” When Sue says she would rather call it “community learning,” she emphasizes that *learning* happens as a *community of practice*.<sup>152</sup> It’s revealing that the subculture is flexible enough to allow such expressive, interpretive suggestions, which lead to individualized meanings. In a way, Sue takes part in

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<sup>151</sup> Community in the sense of direct relationships, primarily face-to-face, though supported through organizational emailing, phone calls, etc. I focus on notions of virtual community and networks in case study #3. Mediated communication is the crux of the fourth case study. Mediated and constructed subculture make up the bulk of the fifth case study. All of these case studies, I should note, involve a complicated sense of hybridity and related conceptual tensions around notions of “real life vs. virtual.”

<sup>152</sup> From fieldwork, February 5, 2006.

constructing her identity, her family's identity, and her community's identity through this linguistic renaming.<sup>153</sup>

### A Civil War Role-Play

Now that you have a brief introduction to Eli's family and their coop, I'd like to closely examine a specific event, which struck me as exemplary of this community and

its social practice of learning. During my evening with the family, Eli described the activity he had just done that day with his coop. Cynthia, the "history buff" parent has been holding a series of historical reenactments, which Sue referred to as



Eli's coop at the Civil War burst. (courtesy Sue)

"bursts."<sup>154</sup> Sue explained what they

meant by this "lingo. The burst was a name Cynthia used for the Civil War piece she

lead. She called it a burst b/c that's what it was a burst of learning for a few Fridays and

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<sup>153</sup> This linguistic play also happens within the punk and feminist scene, further discussed in the fifth case study. Stephen Duncombe writes that Riot Grrrl zine "authors and contributors go out of their way to stress that what follows is only their point of view...Kathlene [, of *Bikini Kill*, sees naming as]...a danger in Riot Grrrl. 'Have you noticed,' she writes, 'that there is this weird phenomenon that happens to do with naming something and having it turn into something else'"(p.69, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*). This is precisely the fear Susannah Sheffer shares about using the word "unschooling" in the *History/Historiography* chapter of this thesis.

<sup>154</sup> Most of the organizational arrangements for these bursts happens through email. It reminds me of *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* by Howard Rheingold. I corresponded with Rheingold briefly about my thesis research. I'd asked him if he'd heard of unschooling or come across it in his research. "No. But I know of Illich and deschooling...I am fascinated by your question, but I'm afraid you know more about this than I do." I'm reminded of another more amusing version of such social uses of new media. Bill Wassik, of Brooklyn, NY, invented "flash mobs" in 2003. He initiated these happenings using the affordances of new media, emailing out directives to friends, such as meet at such and such hotel and randomly start applauding at 1pm. Emails spread virally, resulting in huge groups of people who would come together, perform some surrealistic action, and then disperse before the police could respond or confused onlookers could figure out what was going on. Bill's experiment was predicated on the assumption that hipsters would congregate if they thought they were in on the next cool thing. In his "tell all" article in *Harper's*, Bill explains how his "association with the fad has heretofore remained semi-anonymous, on a first-name- only basis to all but friends and acquaintances. For more than two years, I concealed my identity for scientific purposes, but now that my experiment is essentially complete, corporate America having fulfilled (albeit a year later than expected) its final phase, I finally feel compelled to offer a report: on the flash mob, its life and times, and its consummation this summer in the clutches of the Ford Motor Company." Bill refers to his prediction of the cooption of flash mobs by advertisers. [http://www.harpers.org/MyCrowd\\_01.html](http://www.harpers.org/MyCrowd_01.html)

then a break, when the kids did other things, from orchestra, to snow boarding, to drum lessons and Cynthia worked. [sic]" Sue explained, "They have done several reenactments, last year's was the Revolutionary War."<sup>155</sup>

The day I visited with Eli's family had been the culmination of their Civil War unit. The kids had all chosen different historical figures or characters to play and families researched them online and at the library. One child chose Abe Lincoln. Another girl chose Clara Barton. Eli "chose to focus on a Union soldier named Billy Yanks, who represented a typical soldier and [he] decided to be a wounded soldier." Eli explained to me that "Billy Yanks" was the nickname given to Union soldiers during the Civil War. Eli put together a costume of items raided from Sue's closet and a trip to a secondhand store. He wore a blue coat with brass buttons, trousers and boots, his mom's old leather purse, a bandage wrapped around his head and his arm in a sling. The kids arrived at the appointed house dressed in character with a script to read or an idea of what to perform. Eli chose to stay in character, though he told me that not all the kids felt like doing that: "Nobody *had* to do it...had to say 'Hi my name is'—whoever the person was they were doing."<sup>156</sup> As a soldier, he was interested in the everyday experience of the troops. He'd spent some time researching how the soldiers got food and water during the war. The day of the improv, a friend brought in different toy soldiers to set up a mock battle. Eli used these and other objects to represent the supply chain and blockades. He set these up and explained how it worked to the other kids. He told them how "General Sherman got his troops to destroy everything when they marched through the South."<sup>157</sup> In this way, Eli had learned new information that he had sought out according to his interests. He then

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<sup>155</sup> From email from Sue, April, 2006.

<sup>156</sup> From fieldwork, February 5, 2006.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

shared that knowledge with the group. The kids embody these ways of learning, by researching information, which they relate to on a personal level, and by then performing that knowledge.

The role-playing event was enjoyable and memorable for Eli. During the evening I spent with the family, Eli enthusiastically used the digital camera to show me the photos Marc had taken at the burst. While looking at the group shot of the kids, Sue proudly pointed out how it's a very ethnically diverse coop. In the group photo, we see kids of various colors, sexes, and backgrounds. Indeed, Abe



Lincoln was role-played by a multi-racial child who'd been adopted by a white, lesbian couple. When I asked Sue to email me a copy of the photo so that I might include it in my thesis, she went through a process of consensus, getting permission from each of the families, before she emailed me the photo. The discussion about the role-play—and indeed the way Eli's family represented the role-play to me, the researcher—focused not just on the activity itself, but also on the families who participated. For me, this revealed the hybrid ways in which this coop embeds learning into the mesh of everyday social interactions. Because unschoolers don't rely on institutions to predetermine social groups and group events, they must build those social practices from the ground up.

Unschoolers do not take relationships, diversity and mutual respect for granted. This may seem like stating the obvious, but consider that unschoolers must intentionally negotiate these community relationships themselves, rather than deferring to institutional chains of command. This in fact, was one of Illich's original points in his book

*Deschooling Society*.<sup>158</sup> Thus we see Eli’s coop as an instantiation of a utopian vision—not a complete communal experiment as the intentional communes so iconic of the 60s, but nonetheless a reformation of social interactions usually institutionalized in school.

The parents of the coop bring their kids together in these bursts as a way of deliberately reworking an “educational” event. Marc explained what his intentions are:



*“My view of unschooling is that it is education for critical consciousness applied to kids who are in the process of identity formation. The intent is to get them to dialog with each other through many forms of play, and achieve ‘conscienization’ of themselves and the world. The adults in their world facilitate this by creating the learning communities and try to avoid ‘banking’ knowledge trying to maintain a dialogical interaction. It is hard because of the natural power differences between kids and parents. I try to maintain this by having the kids rather than the adults be the initiators of dialog between them. As you can tell, I am greatly influenced by Freire as many of my generation are.”<sup>159</sup>*

In the first case study, I examined how Mary and Peter de-hierarchize text through the unschooling practice of learning to read. Similarly, Marc and Sue’s philosophical stance informs their child’s practices of learning history with the social group.

In the Civil War burst, Eli and his unschooling friends had engaged in improvisational practice, something I’ve noticed many unschooling families incorporating into their learning. David, an unschooling dad in California, remarked that his son has been hosting a Dungeons and Dragons game at his house once a week for years. An unschooling mom in New Mexico, Sandra’s kids play Massively Multi-Player

<sup>158</sup> Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*.

<sup>159</sup> I emailed Sue, Marc and Eli a draft of this case study to read. This quote is from Marc’s emailed response with comments and suggestions. Email April 14.

Online Role-playing Game (MMPORGs) and take part in the Society for Creative Anachronism. An unschooler now living in Oregon, Carsie told me that the only requirement at Grace Llewellyn's *Not Back To School Camp* for unschoolers is everyone offers a workshop to the group.<sup>160</sup> Theater clubs and historical reenacting have cropped up again and again during my research. These reenacting, role-playing, and improvisational practices involve a number of skills that unschoolers value. What follows here is a theorizing of the social practice of this child-driven learning with its motivation of group activity.

First of all, these activities lead to a social and performative event, which provides the impetus for the individual child to concentrate on preparation. While it can be said that there's an audience, giving the child a feeling of something at stake, I would note that these activities often involve a community in which the line between audience and performer is blurred. In his 2005 documentary *Unschooling*, Jason Marsh interviews Aaron, a Californian unschooler, who says he hasn't "spent much time going with my friends to the mall. That's not something I do."<sup>161</sup> Instead, he participates regularly in *Dickens Fair*, a role-playing space for fans of Charles Dickens' novels. He describes how all the participants are performing for each other: "In all of our imaginations we're in London in 1850. I come and dress up...I also participate in a Scottish-Irish dance group, in which I juggle. It takes care of my history requirements like you wouldn't believe. Just to be able to walk down the street in 1850s London and carry on idle chitchat, you

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<sup>160</sup> This can be a performance or instructional or anything. They have a lot of talent shows (not talent *contests*). For more on *NBTSC*, see Case Study #3.

<sup>161</sup> *Unschooling*, Marsh's 2005 thesis film from journalism grad school at University of California Berkeley. It has screened at a number of film festivals.



have to know...are you Whig or are you Tory.” It’s a form of *theater in the midst*.<sup>162</sup> So while this dynamic between members of audience-participants can be said to be motivating, it’s not as intimidating as *standing in the spotlight on stage*, as it were. This environment is drawing you in rather than intimidating you.

Secondly, such activities reconfigure the relationship between the learner and a body of knowledge. The unschooling practice, in this case role-playing the Civil War, invites the learner to seek out facts and then embody that collection of personally investigated knowledge with one’s body and personality. Thus the kids play with and embody the knowledge as it relates to their identities and interests. The historical significance of Abe Lincoln comes to be manifested to the group through an adopted multi-racial child. Eli embodied the Union soldier through his interests in the everyday experience, as typified by food and pain. This accessible entry point grew to encompass larger, perhaps more abstract concepts of the power dynamics of the supply chain and destruction of raw materials, as exemplified by Sherman’s March. This results in a deepening of the children’s experience with historical facts. In this way, Eli is much more likely to remember Sherman’s name, say, or the dates of the Civil War, than if he had just taken a quiz in the context of school. Thus the improvisational unschooling

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<sup>162</sup> My idea of *theater in the midst* relates to Bakhtin’s notions of the carnival: “The grotesque body cannot be a spectator to events, it can only be a participant. As Bakhtin puts it, a carnival sense of the world ‘does not know footlights.’...[C]arnivalization’—accomplishes two mergings: one between realism and a utopian ideal, the other between literature and real, generative life”(p.444, Gary Saul Morson & Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics*). I take the word *grotesque*, here, to mean a body whose unruly subversion is contingent upon interactions with other people in a group setting. Bakhtin wrote about the cultural dynamics of the carnival, the atmosphere of pleasure, spectacle, and also participation rather than what traditionally might be considered the audience. Here we have the audience-participant, not unlike the producer-consumers of zines, as I will discuss further in Case Study #5. Unschoolers’ approach similarly moves through embodied knowing. Bakhtin made a point of the seamlessness of this experience, but I’d like to note the extraordinary circumstances of the carnival. It’s a time and space and performance that the group designates as special. Erving Goffman wrote about the nature of play in the performance of everyday interactions in his seminal work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. While Eli’s unschooling coop role-plays something out of the ordinary, the performance through their bodies and their community of friends simultaneously roots this performance in their everyday experience. Thus role-playing heightens a sense of discovery while still living up to the unschooling ideal of “authentic” learning integrating into everyday experience. It’s a collaborative form of meaning-making. That said, once one has entered into a community of practice, hierarchies of skill and resourcefulness can be competitive. See also the fifth case study, which focuses on DIY media-making aspects of unschooling.

practice approaches knowledge from the child's perspective, rather than giving priority to a set of facts and concepts predetermined by the teacher.

This situated, embodied and social practice results in *knowing* with such intimacy that one's interaction with it—the material, the information, the instrument, the tool—becomes an extension of oneself. Role-playing activities—and here I would include many MMPORGs, the SCA, D&D—encourage kids to think on their feet.<sup>163</sup> Improvisation requires kids to go in-character—which is another way of saying to have a deep, dialogical intimacy with information. Unschoolers aspire to this deep relationship to the practice of learning. It's an immersive experience, but not unlike improvising music, the player is aware of the meta-level rules. The improviser doesn't lose himself, but rather gains a facility in expressing aspects of himself in relation to a text or body of information. This practice develops other skills, as well as encountering and embodying information. In an IM interview with Kirby, an unschooling teen in New Mexico, he spoke about the real-time strategy that gets honed as he takes part in the SCA and MMPORGs. "In a fast paced game, the main reason people will play is for the quick thinking it requires and the rush of the game."<sup>164</sup> Going in-character while simultaneously remaining aware of meta-level strategy work to make improvisation a practice that at once sharpens skills of the individual-in-play-with-the-group.

The social nature of this improv practice also involves emotional aspects of group dynamics. Peter and Richard's mom, Mary, told me a story of when she and her husband, Mike, first met. The couple realized they had the common interest of playing music.

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<sup>163</sup> See James Paul Gee's book *What Videogames have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. The Society for Creative Anachronism, Massively Multi-Player Online Games and Dungeons and Dragons, could be considered what Gee calls "affinity groups." These are spaces for both playing games but also where people come together through common interests to engage in the social practice of learning. According to Gee, "for critical learning, the learner must be able to consciously attend to, reflect on, critique, and manipulate those design grammars on a meta-level"(p.40).

<sup>164</sup> From an IM interview with Kirby from March 13, 2006.

While Mike is in fact a musician as well as an instrument designer and restorer, Mary could read music and was trained to play flute. Mike invited her to just start playing with him, to “just play” together. But she froze. She didn’t know how to just *improvise*. “It was terrible. I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t do it! I had this self-consciousness because I knew all the notes, I had the skill, but I couldn’t just do it...I was kind of shaken by it. So after that, I didn’t want to be like that anymore...Then I started knitting and I didn’t look at the pattern... It sounds ridiculous! But I consciously, thought ok, I’m cooking but I’m not going to look at cookbooks.”<sup>165</sup> She described to me the almost spiritually painful nature of this situation. It struck me that this social practice of improvising could also be called *jamming*.<sup>166</sup> For unschoolers, the personal expression that comes from improvisation feels like an authentic expression of the individual as participant-in-the-social-group. This is why Mary was so upset. It was as though some part of her being was cut off—from herself and from her relationship with Mike. And when we relate this to schooling vs. unschooling, we can see how the schoolish model teaches children to *play back something that’s already been recorded*. Families whose children thrive above and beyond school (these smart kids who are bored at school might choose to unschool) often use information gleaned from school as a jumping-off point, not remaining satisfied with rote memorization or keeping school knowledge in a box.

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<sup>165</sup> From phone interview with Mary, December 11, 2005.

<sup>166</sup> Historically, liberal culture—dare I say hippy culture, to make a sweeping generalization—holds jamming in high regard. Think of folk music, *The Grateful Dead*, drum circles and hacky-sack. In an April 13, 2006 email to me, Eli’s dad, Marc responded, “I’ve always associated [jamming] with Afro-American Culture, specifically Jazz that was generated from the history of extreme cultural as well as sociopolitical oppression. Jamming or improvisation has been an exercise in freedom by those with limited freedoms. The liberal, hippy culture you refer to has in part, been superficial imitations of Afro American (and Native American) culture.” If may be “superficial imitation,” but it still feels authentic to the imitators. Here’s another example of this idea of authenticity. Researcher Miriam Camitta wrote about vernacular literacy in a Philadelphia high school. In describing teens writing notes and poetry to each other, Camitta writes that adolescents “believe that writing, when it comes from ‘within,’ is ‘telling the truth’”(p.242, Camitta, “Vernacular Writing: Varieties of Literacy Among Philadelphia High School Students,” in *Cross-cultural Approaches to Literacy*, ed. Brian Street).

The intuitive nature of such improvising skills makes them invisible. The derivation of such skills in the home has traditionally made it difficult for schools to understand or influence in intentional ways. Scholars, such as Brice Heath, have written about the linguistic mechanisms such literacy and learning practices. For those kids who achieve in school, according to Shirley Brice Heath, during out of school everyday practice, “[i]t is as though in the drama of life, townspeople parents freeze scenes and parts of scenes at certain points along the way. Within the single frame of a scene, they focus children’s attention on objects or events in the frame, sort out referents for the children to name, give the child ordered turns for sharing talk about this referent, and then narrate a description of the scene. Through their focused language, adults make the potential stimuli in the child’s environment stand still for a cooperative examination and narration between parent and child.”<sup>167</sup> In similarly engaging and improvising practices, unschoolers shift the dynamic from just parent-child, to intergenerational groups in which the children are respectfully treated as equal players.

To draw from Bakhtin’s applied literary analysis, with the practice of the Civil War improv, “the dynamic processes of this semiotic space allow for the production of a continual stream of new interpretations of a text much like those produced as new readers encounter a work of fiction.”<sup>168</sup> This unschooling practice of improv encourages the social production of meaning, “a concrete example of how voices may...come into contact, interanimate, and infiltrate one another in various ways.” This practice

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<sup>167</sup> p.351, Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*.

<sup>168</sup> p.76 James Wertsch on Bakhtin in *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*. Brice Heath, in her writing on the differences of narrative structure in different cultures, points out that American public schools have normalized certain rules to the point where they are naturalized and invisible. Therefore when children use their imaginations to write a story for an assignment, they improvise along a set of constraints. These constraints may not be visible because the mainstream townspeople children internalize them through their lived experience, such as the practice of bedtime stories.

intertwines fictional and historical modes of representation in complex ways that problematize the notion of a singular, authoritative historical fact. Further, “[w]hereas authoritative discourse [of the textbook used by the teacher and classroom of students] tends to discourage contact, internally persuasive discourse encourages it.”<sup>169</sup> My point here is that free improvisation is hard to assess, measure or quantify. As a skill nurtured in unschooling, it may also become so naturalized that it becomes self-evidenced away. In reality, improvisation is an immensely important skill that many schooled children miss out on, or at least, the institution of school does not legitimize it.

The difference between improvisation and simulation comes to light in the unschooling subculture. Many unschoolers question the value of simulation, seeing it as not a direct, but as a mediated experience. For them, simulation runs the risk some of the “fakey” connotations which school so often engenders. A simulation is always at some level constructed by another, thus running the risk of manipulation by an authority. Simulations carry the connotation of a system in which humans are compelled to play a desired role in a scheme in which there’s a desired outcome. This resembles a form of behaviorist training, reminiscent of the state of affairs in the *technocratic society*. Simulation also, to put it more simply, detracts from direct experience. Katrina, who was homeschooled in a community of whitewater river rafting guides, explained the anti-technology sentiments of those people close to her: “Why read about something or do something on the computer when you could be out there doing it yourself?”<sup>170</sup>

But these computer simulations are being renegotiated. Techno-savvy kids seek them out as legitimate experiments. For many unschooling families, there’s a

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p.83. Wertsch uses the example of reported voice to explain Bakhtinian notions of the dialogical use of language as opposed to “literal meaning” and transmission model of communication.

<sup>170</sup> From fieldwork with Katrina, March 29, 2006.

generational gap between young people and parents in how they conceptualize learning with new media. “I don’t see why anyone would at least not want to familiarize themselves with technology, just cuz that’s where the major cultural experiments are happening—the MMPORG societies and economic experiments,” says Sphennings, a floppy-haired sixteen-year-old in an old army jacket.<sup>171</sup> Sphennings made the decision to drop out of school and pursue unschooling. He had to convince his parents, who were somewhat resistant to the idea. In this way, he represents a young person caught in between unschooling and mainstream learning practices. He also describes the differences between his dad’s conception of new media and his own. Sphennings’ main interests are “computers, and ah...avoiding getting in trouble or yelled at. I also do a lot of biking and hiking, trying to get into parkour, trying to improve my programming skills. I do a lot of RPGs, both boffing and LARPs, along with D&D, GURPS and *Vampire: the Masquerade*.”<sup>172</sup> Indeed, to many adults it might sound like Sphennings speaks another language. This linguistic play signifies the gulf many families perceive between parents and their IMing, MMPORGing kids. Sphennings continues:

*“Anytime my dad tries to limit my access to technology, we get into a really big fight cuz it’s just where my life is headed right now. [It’s a] clash in ideals and the fact that he perceives that I spend all of my time on there. We both look at technology differently. He uses it for his job...I use it for socialization, entertainment and information gathering. My dad likes having control over what I do. Before I was really into computers, I was into D&D and it was the same issue. I thought it was a really healthy use of my time. It was teaching me math*

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<sup>171</sup> Fieldwork at North Star, Hadley, MA on Dec 15, 2005.

<sup>172</sup> MMPORGs are Massively-multi-player online role-playing games. Parkour is a new sport which can be thought of as “extreme walking” of sorts. It’s not unlike skateboarding in that it’s not explicitly competitive. It involves running through a landscape and leaping, vaulting over obstacles in the most graceful manner. To decode Sphennings’ other interests: Role-playing games, boffing (fighting with padded swords or other weapons), Live Action Role-playing, Generic Universal Role-Playing System. *Vampire: the Masquerade* is a roleplaying game, which first came out in 1991. According to Bruckman who has written about online, text-based role-playing games called MUDs (for Multi-User Dungeons), “[t]he earliest MUDs such as MUD1 and Scepter of Goth were based on the role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons, and were written in late 1978 to 1979”(p.6, Amy Bruckman, *Identity Workshop: Emergent Social and Psychological Phenomena in Text-Based Virtual Reality*).

*skills, reading skills, lots of statistical analysis, storytelling and group dynamics. He saw it as a waste of time.”*

Unschooling kids growing up today play with new media with a flexibility, creativity and sociability yet to be fully understood. How is it that many adults don't share this conception of a distributed virtual lab in which ideas percolate, while some do? Of the adult unschoolers I interviewed, many of the pro-tech ones are involved in such experiments. Unschooling dad Jeremy works as a computer programmer who specializes in simulations of system dynamics (for instance, he built a socially networked simulation of global warming for a first phase NSF project called CO2FX).<sup>173</sup> Unschooling

Massachusetts father, Ed develops experimental virtual collaboration spaces (Squeak, Croquet).<sup>174</sup>

Joyce, an unschooling mom in Massachusetts, is a software engineer and relishes her daughter's online role-playing activities on such websites as

Subeta.org.<sup>175</sup> Rob, an unschooling dad in California, works as a technology specialist and innovator at

private school and is interested in Massive Change movement.<sup>176</sup> Perhaps being involved in the participatory development of such simulations allows these adults to experience the sort of excitement that many young people are growing up with as a matter of course.



*Aanan using a toy computer her older sister Mesa set up for her. “When anyone was using the real computer, Aanan was able to join in using her ‘little computer’ right next it.” (courtesy Jeremy Merritt)*

<sup>173</sup> “CO2FX is a web based multi-user educational game which explores the relationship of global warming to economic, political and science policy decisions. The game is driven by a systems dynamics model and is presented in a user friendly interface intended for the high school user.” <http://www.globalwarminginteractive.com/>.

<sup>174</sup> “...a new open source software platform for creating deeply collaborative multi-user online applications. It features a network architecture that supports communication, collaboration, resource sharing, and synchronous computation among multiple users. Using Croquet, software developers can create powerful and highly collaborative multi-user 2D and 3D applications and simulations.” <http://opencroquet.org/>.

<sup>175</sup> A role-playing site. <http://subeta.org>.

<sup>176</sup> “Massive Change is a project by Bruce Mau Design and the Institute without Boundaries, commissioned and organized by the Vancouver Art Gallery...Design has emerged as one of the world's most powerful forces. It has placed us at the beginning of a new period of human possibility, where all economies and ecologies are becoming global, relational, and interconnected.” <http://www.massivechange.com/>.

The technocratic critique would also see real life improvisation as affording the low-cost, low barrier of entry of using the body as the only “interface.” One of the threats of technology is that it aggravates already existing gaps in accessibility.<sup>177</sup> The difficulty in resolving these disparate views of experiential learning comes down to the fact that pro-tech people’s skills are naturalized to them, while the use of the body and the very real aspects of face-to-face communication are naturalized for anti-tech unschoolers.

## Conclusion

My unit of analysis, which focuses in on Eli’s community “coop,” analyzes the social practice of collaborative learning. The coop with their “bursts” serves as an example of how some unschoolers organize their real life communities of practice. The Civil War role-play exemplifies the unschoolers’ practice of de-institutionalizing social relationships with experiential learning. Further, the authentic social action of volunteerism and the linguistic naming of community give us insight into the unschoolers’ conceptualization of *community*. This case study also points out the strengths and challenges of maintaining such a de-institutional, intentional, yet voluntary community (in contrast to Pierre Bourdieu’s “reproduction” of cultural hierarchy through institutions).<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> In the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, Llewellyn writes “Sometimes we sit too long at our monitors, our cells bombarded by enemy particles. Our eyes strain and grow myopic, our wrists cramp and develop carpal tunnel syndrome.” Calling it a “funny, wise book,” she goes on to quote *The Minutes of the Lead Pencil Club* by Bill Henderson: “‘Each time you give a machine a job to do you can do yourself,’ writes Henderson, ‘You give away a part of yourself to the machine...If you drive instead of walk, if you use a calculator instead of your mind, you have disabled a portion of yourself. On the other hand, every time you remove a technology from your life, you discover a gift.’” My classmate at CMS, Kestrell wrote her thesis about disability, tech, and science-fiction. She writes about what we conceive of as natural, normal and human in relation to the body and technology. And yet, issues of race and class and the Digital Divide also come up in these discussions.

<sup>178</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*.



Unschooling improv and role-play are inherently social activities. Because the group consists of audience-participants, they build the world of the improv together. This participatory practice allows the kids to make meaning together, in the case of the Civil War role-play, relating history and researched texts to their own lives. Such dialogical learning constitutes the reorganization—both of the self-in-the-social-group and in relation to bodies of knowledge. The supportive space of audience-participants offers interaction and motivation without necessarily competition. The performance of knowledge entails simultaneity —“doing-it-yourself” (embodying knowledge) while playing at not being yourself (acting in-character). In the end, such participatory practices of social learning results in highly memorable experiences and the development of various thinking and social skills.

Unschooling philosophical preferences for the *authentic* lead them to situated experiences of improv and role-play. “Jamming” can be seen as an authentic expression of the self-in-group. These practices are a way of embodying knowledge with such facility that the interface seems to disappear. This sense of *free* and *authentic* expression gets to the heart of unschooling as emotional practice, in the humanist sense. And yet, we can see tensions of the technocratic critique embedded within the subculture. Some unschoolers are suspicious of the authenticity of mediated experiential learning (such as computer simulations or MMPORGs for example), questioning whether they really offer freedom. Whether an unschooler chooses physical or virtual modes for experiential-social learning depends on the habits of her community of practice and her conception of *authenticity*.

**Case Study #3**  
**Carsie's Network:**  
*Connecting a Geographically Dispersed Population*

**Introduction**

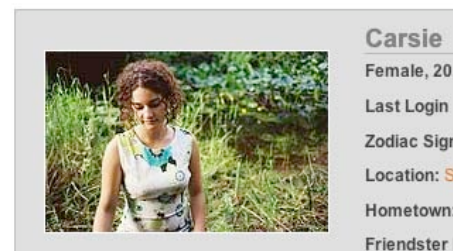
I've chosen this case study in order to highlight the interactions within the geographically dispersed population of unschoolers. Here, I analyze the role of virtual community and real life community as negotiated through various media forms and face-to-face interactions.

I analyze the ways in which unschoolers build networks of their own, since they don't rely upon larger institutionalized mechanisms for connection to other people and resources, whether for information or companionship. The author of the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, Grace Llewellyn started *Not Back to School Camp*. I use her handbook and *NBTSC* as valuable examples of the intersection of real life and online community for young unschoolers. Much of the unschoolers' conceptualizations of these practices relate to ideas of Ivan Illich and the print precedent of John Holt's *Growing Without Schooling* magazine.



**Background**

During one of those amazing moments in which work and leisure collide, I was searching on Friendster.com, a very popular social networking site, when I made an unschooling connection. Because Friendster allows you to search people's interests by keyword, I was in essence, fishing for "unschoolers." I found and ended up contacting quite a few young people. I met Carsie, a twenty-year-old



unschooler, this way. If we ever meet in person, I'll probably only recognize her youthful face, rimmed with brown curls, by the photos in her profile.<sup>179</sup> Carsie spent her childhood in rural Virginia unschooling with her stay-at-home mom and author dad. She now resides in Eugene, Oregon where she works as a grant-writer at an alternative school for at-risk youth called Wellsprings Friends School.<sup>180</sup>

As Carsie and I corresponded, she invited me to be a virtual friend on Friendster and MySpace. MySpace is another vastly popular social networking website, distinguished from Friendster in its emphasis on flexible ways of sharing media. On MySpace, you have more options to customize your page. Many young people use the website, in fact, as a way to showcase their talents. Bands have MySpace accounts dedicated to their music, where visitors can stream their mp3s directly through the page, download photos, find out about shows, and often click to websites selling Cds. Not only did I learn from Carsie's MySpace profile that she's a folk musician, but I also listened to her songs right there.<sup>181</sup> "Myspace has been incredible - I've sold three CDs to total strangers who found me randomly on myspace, plus I've gotten a ton of wonderful comments and messages from strangers. It's such a pleasant surprise."<sup>182</sup> MySpace exemplifies a new wave in grassroots media distribution.

## **Talking through and about Grassroots Networks**

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<sup>179</sup> After I'd used Friendster's search function to look for people who listed unschooling as an interest. I sent Carsie a message through Friendster explaining my project and gave her my email address, saying if she'd be interested in doing an interview, she should contact me. She got right back to me and within a few days, we were doing an interview over the phone. I think prompt response is a feature of these social networking websites. People are instantly associated and contextualized, rather than "cold-call emails" which are more out of the blue.

<sup>180</sup> Wellsprings Friends School, <http://www.wellspringsfriends.org/>.

<sup>181</sup> She's quite good! <http://www.myspace.com/carsieblanton>.

<sup>182</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

During our phone interview in March 2006, I mentioned to Carsie that I'd recently been in Vancouver visiting Matt Hern and The Purple Thistle, the unschooling youth center he helps to run. Carsie, exclaimed, "No way! I just called him right before you called. I wanted to ask you, do you know about Quo Vadis?"<sup>183</sup> I said no, I hadn't heard of it. "Oh this is exciting!... Quo Vadis is four years old. It started out as a gathering for unschoolers and now it's a gathering for lifelong learners, so they've kind of broadened the scope. It was started by young adults who went to Grace's camp, who still wanted to get together and network, forty to sixty young adults, mostly in their 20s and 30s. We try to get guests to come give lecture and workshops. So this year we're trying to get Matt Hern. I want you to



*Carsie's photo on her MySpace page, where she promotes her music. (courtesy Carsie Blanton)*

come too!"<sup>184</sup> Carsie taps into the geographically dispersed unschooling network and knows who's who and the latest goings-on. In fact, she plays an active part in negotiating the hybrids between virtual space (Friendster, MySpace, the Quo Vadis website, Craigslist) and real life (the Quo Vadis event, *Not Back to School Camp*, her performances, her work, meeting people through Craigslist).<sup>185</sup> Carsie reflects on networks in her life and the unschooling subculture, "Network theory is actually a major interest of mine. It's worth saying that much of the unschooling community is based on

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<sup>183</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Carsie points out that Craigslist is all about anti-consumerist reuse through social connections. I think this falls in line with the unschooling philosophy.

social networks in the first place, because of Not Back to School Camp and Quo Vadis. The group of people I'm living with now met at NBTSC, as well as several other community houses (Portland, Austin.) Unschoolers tend to travel in packs, literally, and often go on road trips or bike tours together.”<sup>186</sup> Unschooling connections have a large presence in her real life social network. Though she's on Friendster and MySpace and uses the web, she admits to feeling ambivalent about it: “Especially with chatting and MySpace. It's a compulsive thing.”<sup>187</sup> My analysis in this case study, then, looks at unschoolers' perceptions of the positive and negative affordances of these online and real life networks.

Carsie described her childhood as somewhat lonely. As a rural unschooler, she said most of her friends when she was little were other homeschoolers, but most of them homeschooling for religious reasons. Pausing, she told me she considers herself an *unschooler* and checked in to make sure I knew the difference. “My family and I, we're atheists...I started to realize that my homeschooling friends didn't have the same beliefs as I did. And that started to feel important. But even when I went to public school in rural Virginia, it wasn't such an improvement.”<sup>188</sup> Carsie gave school a try for a year when she was twelve. She didn't find what she was looking for socially in “public school, where [she] didn't like or connect with the majority of the people.”<sup>189</sup> But things were about to change at the age of thirteen.

During our interview, Carsie recounted the story of a woman who called up her mother on the telephone one day in 1995 when Carsie was about ten. The woman wanted

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<sup>186</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

<sup>187</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

to order a copy of Carsie's dad's book.<sup>190</sup> It turned out to be unschooling author Grace Llewellyn on the phone, and as Carsie told me, "she's been a family friend ever since. I've been going to *Not Back to School Camp* or a counselor there ever since. I'm actually having dinner with Grace tonight."<sup>191</sup> At the age of thirteen, Carsie first went to Grace Llewellyn's *Not Back to School Camp*, an unstructured summer program for unschoolers from around the country. Carsie's mom had read Llewellyn's *Teenage Liberation Handbook* and found it inspiring.<sup>192</sup> "Then Grace came to a Radical Honesty convention [put on by Carsie's father] the following year, and that's when I first heard about camp. The first year I went, my mom was a counselor, which I think made me more comfortable with going. I made a lot of very close friends very fast - friends I kept in touch with throughout the year, so I think it made it easier for me to be at home. My reaction to the campers was immediately WOW - I had never felt so overwhelmed with awe by a group of people."<sup>193</sup> Clearly, Carsie found the community of unschoolers at *NBTSC* to be her real community. The initial link to this authentic, yet constructed community centers on Llewellyn's book and also, the human connections that surround it. Indeed, the book has had a generative effect for many unschoolers: it has become a common mediating thread between unschoolers around the country. Given the importance unschoolers place on experiential-social learning in the physical world (as described in Case Studies #1 and #2), the camp is a brilliant idea. Its importance to the campers and to the unschooling subculture can't be underestimated.

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<sup>190</sup> Carsie's dad is gestalt psychologist Brad Blanton, author of *Practicing Radical Honesty* and *Radical Parenting*.

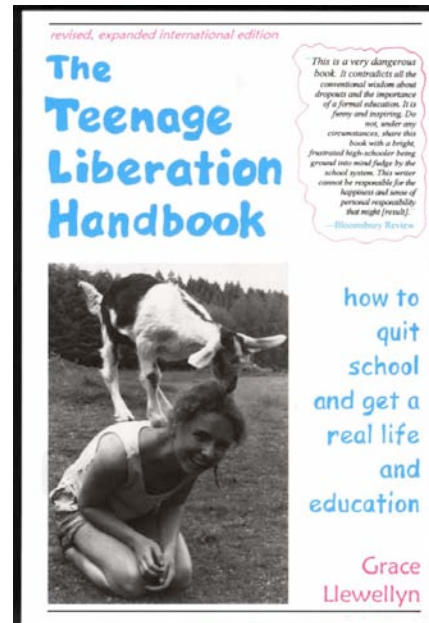
<sup>191</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>192</sup> It's telling that Carsie didn't read the *Teenage Liberation Handbook* until later. In a way, she didn't need it: she was already unschooling. Llewellyn's book most often serves as a tool for dropping out and tuning in.

<sup>193</sup> Email from Carsie on April 12, 2006.

I asked Carsie about the importance of Llewellyn’s book to the unschooling subculture. “What the community is founded on and the biggest networking tool we all have are the books. That’s why we all have a word for it. Grace’s book, especially, and the camp that came out of the book has brought together hundreds of teenagers and it’s been pretty major in our lives.”<sup>194</sup> Indeed, the informal canon of books came up again and again in speaking with my informants: Llewellyn’s *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, David Guterson’s *Family Matters*, John Taylor Gatto’s *The Underground History of American Education*, Illich’s *Deschooling Society*, John Holt’s books such as *Teach Your Own* and *After Education*, as well as his magazine *Growing Without Schooling*. Such titles appear on “favorite books” lists on unschooling blogs.

Unschooling old-timers recommend them to newcomers, just as they recommended them to me when I was starting my research. “John Holt is my hero!” Roberto, an unschooling dad in California, told me. “*Family Matters*, I gave that one to my



parents. It's not that they were against us unschooling, I think they just didn't really get it.”<sup>195</sup> The practice of giving a book in this case is not just gifting or loaning: Roberto gave the book to his parents in an attempt to mediate the tricky interfamilial situation. Roberto used the book that he’d plucked as a newcomer from the resources of the network of recommendations by old-timer unschoolers. In this way, the mediated network—that cloud of canon books, blogs, and people—intersected with Rob’s very

<sup>194</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>195</sup> Phone interview with Roberto, October 28, 2005.

personal, real life relationship with his father. In order to convince their disapproving relatives that they're not ruining their children's lives, some unschoolers paraphrase from books and pro-unschooling arguments they find online.<sup>196</sup>

I've noticed that many of the unschoolers I've interviewed mention Llewellyn's book *Teenage Liberation Handbook* as an entry point into unschooling paradigm-shift, as I discussed in the *Introduction to the Five Unschooling Case Studies*. It's almost like an initiation rite of passage. But what makes the form and function of such a media artifact so useful to unschoolers? Llewellyn publishes the *Teenage Liberation Handbook* through her own independent company, Lowry House. The current edition has a memorable, informal snapshot of a girl kneeling in the grass with a goat standing on her back. The image conjures notions of back-to-the-land country life and quirky, liberal identity.<sup>197</sup> Carsie told me her roommate Tilke is redesigning the cover for the next edition. I was surprised, given how recognizable the current cover is. The new one is "hand painted with grass and trees. We talked a lot about what the book means, what the cover should represent. Its main function is as a *handbook*. She drafted different things, but it looked like a truck mechanic handbook or something."<sup>198</sup> The book—as a media object—expresses the form and function of a classic unschooling text. To put it bluntly,

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<sup>196</sup> Bakhtin referred to this practice as "ventriloquation," which "presupposes that a voice is never solely responsible for creating an utterance or its meaning. It begins with the fact that 'the word in language is half someone else's.'" (p.70 James Wertsch quoting Mikhail Bakhtin in *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*). I find the choice of the word "ventriloquation" unfortunate because it has the negative connotations of parroting. I do find this concept useful in the unschooling subculture in which I often heard paraphrasing—sometimes on a subconscious level and sometimes attributed—of the major canon of unschooling texts as well as bits of online chats. This type of speech genre, "talking points" really, has entered a new era of dissemination with new media.

<sup>197</sup> I discuss DIY aesthetics further in the fifth case study. When I asked Carsie if she thought the *Handbook's* DIY aesthetics were intentionally designed, she said she hadn't thought of it this way. She asked Grace who said she hadn't consciously designed the book to express these aesthetics. Rather, the book just *is* homespun and unassuming. For me, this reveals the nature of DIY aesthetics, which derive from a hands-on practice, rather than the trumped up design of publishing houses. On the page in the *Handbook* with the copyright information, Llewellyn includes: "All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any manner whatsoever, including photocopying, except in the case of graffiti on bathroom walls and brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews...Cover photo by Beth Crawford: unschooler/poet/barn builder/goatherd Josanna Crawford, and Raison the goat."

<sup>198</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.



the typesetting looks amateurish in that DIY way. In his book *No More Prisons*, Billy Upski Wimsatt describes his first personal encounter with the *Handbook*:

“So one summer day three years ago, I was in a little bookstore in Portland, Oregon called Reading Frenzy and I asked the owner, Chloe Eudaly, what her favorite books were. She didn’t even have to think about it. ‘That one!’ she said. She pointed to a self-published book with crude red and green illustrations. Its title? *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education* by Grace Llewellyn... [I]f Grace Llewellyn was so self-educated, how come her book looked so amateurish and why hadn’t I heard of it before... In retrospect, maybe I was a little bit threatened.”<sup>199</sup>

While Grace Llewellyn says that the DIY aesthetics weren’t intentional—in that kind of

art-directed marketing kind

of way—the design of the

book springs organically

from the subculture. For

people like Carsie and

Wimsatt, the book’s



A screenshot of the NBTSC LiveJournal community.

connectedness to their everyday lives—how they first accessed it, how they passed it

on—is part of its allure.

Implicit to unschooling is the way a media artifact, such as the *Handbook*, moves through this peer-to-peer and underground, independent network. Let’s unpack the network supporting the *Handbook*:

1. Llewellyn self-publishes the book through her company Lowry House.
2. She distributes it via her website and through the mail.
3. It’s carried by independent bookstores in which customers get personal opinions from the staff.

<sup>199</sup> P.60 *No More Prisons: Urban Life, Homeschooling, Hip-Hop Leadership, The Cool Rich Kids Movement, A Hitchhiker's Guide to Community Organizing, and Why Philanthropy is the Greatest Art Form of the 21st Century*. Wimsatt, who advocates for self-education and urban youth through hip-hop culture, wrote this handbook in 1999. I actually first encountered the phrase “No More Prisons” as graffiti tags on the sidewalks of almost any city I visited. As an urban form of grassroots media, graffiti expressed far more than just Wimsatt’s message. It was part of the vernacular that gave his message weight. He currently works as a political activist in NYC for the *League of Pissed Off Voters*. <http://www.indyvoter.org/>

4. It has no corporate advertising budget but rather gets referenced and talked up by unschoolers themselves, through their real life and online networks, and in the case of Wimsatt, other unschooling books such as *No More Prisons*.
5. The *Handbook* gains a following to the point where Llewellyn starts the *Not Back to School Camp* for unschoolers.
6. *NBTSC* campers start a wiki and LiveJournal through which they stay in touch and spread the word about other unschooling websites, books, other media, and events such as *Quo Vadis*.

This exercise reveals the way the unschooling network works through grassroots modes to not only support media objects and unschoolers, but also reinforces the DIY, Indy identity of the unschooling subculture. More and more such real life nodes of these networks— independent bookstores for example—are under threat from corporate competition. For those people who don't live in pockets of liberal America—Ithaca, NY, say, or Berkeley, CA—online networks tune them in to unschooling.

What about these online networks is unschoolish? Online networks flourish in



part because they're relatively cheap, once you have the computer and Internet access.<sup>200</sup>

They also connect people like Katie, an unschooling mom who lives in a small town in Louisiana. Katie feels a strong pull to “community” online, because she doesn't connect culturally, ideologically with her mostly conservative neighbors. I met Katie through flickr.com, an online, socially networked photo-sharing site for amateur photographers. I found an unschooling group on flickr; members add photos and stories about unschooling to the group pool. One such photo—titled “Navigating”—shows Katie's daughter Evyn

<sup>200</sup> As I mentioned in the *Introduction* to this thesis, unschoolers are predominantly middleclass and live thrifty lives, largely due to the fact that one parent often stays home.

holding up a map. Katie bypasses her real life place and opts for an online space with others who are of a like mind. One of my informants, Roberto, actually found *me* through the tagging I'd been doing on flickr.com and del.icio.us—"unschooling" and "thesis," and he contacted me out of curiosity.<sup>201</sup> Over the course of our correspondence, he sent me many other links—which effectively served as points of entry into unschooling networks. Mediated communication through these networks plays an integral part in shaping the identity and practice of unschoolers, especially those who feel isolated in their real lives.

Online networks and especially chat groups offer information, but simultaneously make connections to other people who can speak from their experiences. For many unschoolers, this is instrumental in initiating unschooling. Joyce, an unschooling mother in the Boston area describes how she first went through the paradigm-shift and decided to unschool: "When Kathryn was 4 and in preschool, I used the free AOL trial software with the new computer and discovered the homeschooling forums. That was the turning point for me... unless Kathryn thought whatever I chose was fun, I was left with options that involved making her which clashed with my goal of enjoying learning. The only homeschoolers focused on joy who spoke positively of their children were the unschoolers. The problem was that I didn't trust that they cared about academics. But they were a lot more fun to hang around with and read than the curriculum administrators! And since the unschoolers were fun I stuck around long enough to finally get what unschooling was about."<sup>202</sup> As a newcomer, Joyce learned from the experiences of old-

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<sup>201</sup> The fourth case study further discusses the interplay between my unschooling informants and myself as the researcher. I'm particularly interested in reciprocal modes of introduction, researching and interviewing. My del.icio.us links for example became part of a collectively built archive using the tag "unschooling."

<sup>202</sup> February 19, 2006 email interview with Joyce.

timers.<sup>203</sup> She became initiated into the subcultural identity of this community of practice by navigating the unschooling networks.

An important precedent of current unschooling networks, John Holt's self-published magazine *Growing Without Schooling* first came out in 1977. Present day unschooling networks function in similar ways: both include hybrids of print-based and face-to-face communications; texts weave non-hierarchical, asynchronous conversations; the tone is informal; there's no one officially in charge. John Holt, when he was alive in the early days of the movement (he died in 1985), served as an unofficial spokesman and focal point of the movement. Surely, Holt would roll over in his grave if someone ever said that he'd "been in control" of the unschooling movement. The very structure of the *GWS* magazine, I believe, is formative and representative of unschooling networks. The magazine consisted of a mix of articles, letters from readers and commentary by Holt and Associates, organized in a nonhierarchical way, blurring the distinction between reader and writer. The authors of these letters largely wrote from personal experiences and thus constituted a vernacular theory of practice. The speech genres were consciously vernacular, anti-professional and accessible. Books and other media are often infused with a DIY philosophy. "Pat Farenga... used to run a home-schoolers' bookstore in Cambridge, Mass. He says that his store's best sellers always included Noah Blake's 1805 book, 'The Diary of an Early American Boy'--which described old-fashioned crafts like nail-making and shingle-splitting. A more recent illustrated edition has been popular 'because it has all these beautifully drawn pictures of how to do things before

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<sup>203</sup> We can see Joyce's experiences as a form of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's *legitimate peripheral participation*, in which she gradually becomes more familiar with the practices of the community through social participation with more experienced people.

technology.’”<sup>204</sup> Not unlike Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog*, *GWS*' form and content reflected its community of producer-consumers, not unlike blogs today, and yet the legitimacy of technology is always up for debate.

*GWS*' linguistic style infused the network with an accessibility that transferred to real life. As *GWS*' subscriptions grew, Holt and Associates started publishing a directory of its geographically dispersed population of subscribers, who used it for hosting traveling unschoolers. In a way, this is a print version of networking we see online today. The public libraries and unschooling conventions—such as *Learning in Our Own Way* conference and the *Live and Learn* conference—become real life spatial nodes for unschoolers.<sup>205</sup> When I interviewed her, Katie was looking forward to meeting friends she'd met online for the first time face-to-face at the upcoming *Live and Learn* conference. Because unschoolers don't rely on institutions, they must organize their own lives. Networks online and in the neighborhood serve this purpose.

For many young Americans growing up in this era, interpersonal relationships are hybrid. Face-to-face relationships go through periods of being augmented online or supported through other media such as the phone, or voice over IP such as Skype, instant messaging. Because it's harder to connect to like-minded kids when you don't have the pool of peers from school, unschoolers may be better served when relationships move through multiple modes. Kathryn, Joyce's fourteen-year-old daughter, described her involvement in an online role-playing website, *Subeta.org*:

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<sup>204</sup> "Taste Commentary: What They're Reading at the Kitchen Table" by Mark Oppenheimer for the *Wall Street Journal*, September 2, 2005 (<http://www.opinionjournal.com/taste/?id=110007199>).

<sup>205</sup> Such instantiations of unschooling clusters bear a similarity to Howard Rheingold's idea of smart mobs, which "consist of people who are able to work in concert together even if they don't know each other." In this way, unschoolers get together as a subculture to forge an alternative, revolutionary type of education. However, Howard Rheingold's continues, the "people who make up smart mobs cooperate in ways never before possible because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing abilities." As my readers have probably noticed, a major theme in this thesis is the unschoolers' ambivalence towards new technology for grassroots organization. (p.xii, Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*).

*“Mainly I started going on subeta because my friend Jake got me into it. We could chat every day on it (especially good since he lives in NY and it was so much easier to talk to him that way) and soon he got me into Role Playing. I created a bunch of characters and gave them personalities and quirks and now I'm RPing on the message boards and talking to people I met on the site. I have a friend in England and a friend in Poland that I talk to about every day as well as Jake. I also know someone from France and a girl who's second language is English, but she creates the most wonderful Role Plays and characters. She's 13 and seems to have a better grasp of the language than many people older than her...Being on subeta has certainly helped my writing and character creating abilities. I've also met tons of really nice people on there, and have been able to keep in touch with my friend Jake. ^^ ”<sup>206</sup>*



*Kathryn named this character Mi.  
(courtesy Kathryn Fetteroll)*

Joyce, Kathryn’s mother, sums up simply an important affordance of such online

networks: “Being able to meet people who share the same interests but don't happen to share the same city! Proximity doesn't need to be a basis for friendship.”<sup>207</sup> In fact, Kathryn highlights the pleasures of global cultural exchange.

These relationships, then, should not be considered just virtual or just real life. The unit of analysis should extend to encompass the way the individual incorporates the communication into her everyday life and real life communities. An eighteen-year-old homeschooler named Vlad moved from his interest in playing video games to programming and building computers. Through the Internet, he said, he was able to take part in a virtual community in which open-sourcers debate the ethical, as well as build the technical, aspects of computers and software. After being immersed in this world for a

<sup>206</sup> From an email from Kathryn, March 28, 2006. Kathryn lays out the varying denominations of her fantasy-play activities: “I did Neopets and other virtual pet things, but they never seemed real. I love creating characters on subeta, and creating their personalities so they seem almost real. But this is the first time I've ever been able to do that, because you couldn't really do that on Neopets as easy as subeta. And they're never really like ‘pets’ to me, that's just what they're called. So before that, I've only had imaginary friends and my real pets.” <http://subeta.org/>.

<sup>207</sup> Joyce’s email March 28, 2006.

while, Vlad came to have a “love-hate relationship” with computers, and felt he was spending too much time “sitting in front of a box,” even though much of his time was spent being social in IRCs chatting with open-source programmers.<sup>208</sup> Vlad wanted to share his knowledge and excitement with his real life community of homeschoolers at North Star, and now that he works at University of Massachusetts Amherst, he’s encouraging his building to switch to Linux and open-source software.<sup>209</sup> When I visited North Star a year or so after the workshop, younger kids there were still talking about Vlad’s open-source class. To take it a step further, I posit that Vlad’s unschooling moves through networks—the online community of open-source programmers and the real life community at North Star and the hybrid space of the UMass lab—in ways that call to mind Illich’s original vision. In 1971, Illich called for “learning webs”—ways of using technology to connect people to share skills and resources.<sup>210</sup>

Illich advocated for the use of technology towards social ends. Writing before the invention of the Internet, Illich provides a prescient suggestion for how people could better use technology:

*“Modern electronics, photo-offset, and computer technologies in principle have provided the hardware that can provide this freedom with a range of undreamt of in the century of the enlightenment. Unfortunately, the scientific know-how has been used mainly to increase the power and decrease the number of funnels through which the bureaucrats of education, politics, and information channel their quick frozen TV dinners. But the same technology could be used to make peer-matching, meeting, and printing as available as the private conversation over the telephone is now.”—Ivan Illich<sup>211</sup>*

Illich’s ideas still influence programmers interested in developing new media for social change. In the Wikipedia entry for Illich, for example, the editors make a self-referential

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<sup>208</sup> May 10, 2006 phone interview with Vlad.

<sup>209</sup> Vlad taught a class about the philosophy and mechanics of open-soiurce at North Star: Self-Directed Learning for Teens: “Learning is Natural. School is Optional” (<http://www.northstarteens.org/>).

<sup>210</sup> Illich , *Deschooling Society*.

<sup>211</sup> p.27 Ivan Illich, in *After Deschooling, What?*, eds. Alan Gartner, Colin Greer, Frank Riessman.

note: “Of particular relevance here is [Illich’s] call (from a 1971 perspective) for the use of advanced technology to support ‘learning webs’. Many characteristics of these as described relate strongly to the nature and use of the WWW in general, and strongly to the workings and ideals of Wikipedia.”<sup>212</sup> But the philosophical message behind Illich’s theories holds true for technology-mediated and face-to-face contexts. The most straightforward example of learning webs doesn’t even necessitate technological assistance. For instance, unschoolers will find mentors in their neighborhoods or local communities, sometimes through word of mouth. Eli’s unschooling coop found Todd, their claymation workshop leader, through friends of colleagues. Mentoring becomes particularly important for high school-aged kids who may grow beyond their parents’ level. Unschoolers may approach a friendly high school teacher for tutoring or take a class at a local community college. And yet, a global public space simultaneously opens up. In Pierre Levy’s *Collective Intelligence*, he describes a utopian vision for a new era of shared knowledge: “Regardless of my temporary social position, regardless of the judgment of an educational institution about my abilities, I can also become an opportunity for learning to someone else. Through my experience of life, my professional career, my social and cultural habits, I can—since knowledge is coextensive with life—provide knowledge resources to the community.”<sup>213</sup> The production of knowledge is situated, and managed through systems of reputation and speed. Networks come down to human interactions, whether computer-mediated or not.

Unschooling kids learn how to navigate through these networks. Carsie’s invitation for me to come to Quo Vadis acknowledges the unschoolers’ sense that social

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<sup>212</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan\\_Illich](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Illich)

<sup>213</sup> p.12-3, Pierre Levy, *Collective Intelligence: Man’s Emerging World in Cyberspace*.



networking is a legitimate, participatory practice. “One thing that my mom has always been really good at and she passed on to me is that doing research by contacting whoever it is who’s an expert on the subject. It seems that’s a way to get away from mass media and get back to personal interactions... When I was into marine biology, I did this project on studying sea grass and so we went to the Baltimore aquarium and talked to the person who knew the most about sea grass...I do see more of that in the unschooling community...There’s no reason why you wouldn’t write your favorite author a letter and ask them a question about their book.”<sup>214</sup> Vlad seeks out networks of open-sourcers. Carsie taps people with expertise and common interests. Roberto finds me doing research through our commonly tagged del.icio.us links. Not unlike the unschooling conception of space and accessing of resources in Case Study #1, unschoolers’ conception of networking with people hinges on a fair amount of happenstance. While Peter and Mary flung open the doors of their home to objects in their communities, many unschoolers consider the Internet a way to extend that same mechanism further a-field. So too do unschoolers seek “kindred spirits” as Sandra put it, even though they may live in far-flung places.

This practice of networking is of course inflected with that ever-present unschooling element: freedom. The kids have the freedom to contact people. They aren’t kept within the institutionalized framework of pre-determined ways and means of networking. Therefore, they largely have to build these networks themselves. Most unschoolers don’t have that internalized fear or doubt about contacting authors or experts or other people. Inherent to the unschooling practice of networking is the unschoolers’ re-conceptualization of the media itself: dismantled barriers between the author and

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<sup>214</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

consumer, user-generated media, grassroots distribution, open access to media, audiences of producers, and in general, an empowered—yet oppositional—subcultural attitude in the face of mass society.

## Technocratic Critique of Networks

Unschoolers debate whether technology for networking and community is



beneficial or detrimental. These issues are particularly relevant for unschoolers. For instance, artist and unschooling mom, Heather explains that her kids play in the studio with her: "I would use large canvases up on the wall and paint with expressive movements and a lot of action.

The kids would feel that energy and fall into the rhythm of playing as well. I found it very difficult to figure out how to make sitting in front of the computer seem like productive work to the kids. It's very hard to find a balance."<sup>215</sup> For this unschooling mom, technology presents real life conflicts. Heather goes on to detail the tension between real life place and virtual space: "As a stay-at-home mom you're kind of isolated and the Internet becomes an important way to get your ideas out. I had read the book *Minutes of the Lead Pencil Society* and I was really against the idea of sitting in front of a computer, but then when I started putting up my comics on the Internet, I started reaching a lot of women. Now about 2000 people get a cartoon email from me. A lot of them are

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<sup>215</sup> December 6, 2005 phone interview with Heather.

from all over the world.”<sup>216</sup> Heather expresses the very personal level on which the technocratic critique manifests.

Carsie and I spoke about the technology debate within unschooling. “That’s a theme I’ve been interested in,” she told me. Unschoolers come from the cultural history of a radical questioning of modern society. And yet, technology and media infuse unschoolers’ lives, like most Americans’, more and more. “The more recent generation of unschoolers have all been very plugged in as far as the Internet goes.”<sup>217</sup> But still, some young unschoolers swim against the present day tide. I asked Carsie why and how there could be such varying sentiments in the unschooling subculture. “It’s hard to say...I’m definitely in both camps. I’ve seen both types in the unschooling community. It seems like there may be two camps about it. I know kids who are programmers and they’re pretty plugged-in in that way. And then I know several kids who work on farms and it’s an important part of their lives to be close to the ground.”<sup>218</sup> Even among the new generation of unschoolers, hackers vs. back-to-the-landers practice their similarly humanistic, anti-authoritarian lifestyles, and yet, the tools they choose to use are very different. They construct networks in different ways, in different contexts.<sup>219</sup>

Sandra, the subject of the Case Study #4, has met a lot of unschoolers face-to-face whom she first knew through the Internet. “I felt like we were kindred spirits in that we were able to volunteer time to help other people [through online discussion groups]...But

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<sup>216</sup> December 6, 2005 phone interview with Heather.

<sup>217</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>218</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

<sup>219</sup> “Before the word ‘hacker’ was misappropriated to describe people who break into computer systems, the term was coined (in the early 1960s) to describe people who create computer systems. The first people to call themselves hackers were loyal to an informal social contract called ‘the hacker ethic.’ As Steven Levy described it, this ethic included these principles: Access to computers should be unlimited and total. Always yield to the Hands-On Imperative. All information should be free. Mistrust authority—promote decentralization”(p.47, Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, quotes Levy’s 1984 book *Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution*).

we're not a community that's going to walk your dog when you twist your ankle."<sup>220</sup> The latter part of this quote reveals a tension in how unschoolers define community and *what networks are good for*. The critique anti-technology unschoolers put forth claims that such networks undermine real community place, in favor of sham, virtual community space. When I first met Matt, the subject of Case Study #5, at the *Learning in Our Own Way* conference, he argued that my use of the term *virtual community* was oxymoronic. When I visited him in Vancouver, we debated this topic again. He feels such online activity is *networking*, sure, but Matt defines *community* as a geographical place. He feels the "Internet [is] inherently degrading of local community and the possibility of real democracy emerging...that rampant virtuality, based on the eradication of time and space as functional communicative restraints, acts to separate individuals from their face-to-face relationships and localities."<sup>221</sup> For Matt, a social-anarchist, new media undercuts the issue of responsibility to a place. The social ramifications of this so-called virtual community disturb unschoolers like Matt. Randy and Beatrice, an unschooling couple, have a similar point of view:

*Beatrice. "I prefer real life community and that is something that we have to continuously evolve, work on and protect. It has to be maintained. As to virtual community, I sometimes read the EdgyCatin' Mama site and the zines- they provide a support and understanding, an 'Ah ha!' of people in a similar situation, that is sometimes lacking in the real community."*

*Randy "Virtual community is largely false, functioning more as a utilitarian 'network' which has some advantages for 'organizing' - Real life community is, for me, less about association based on common convictions and beliefs ( i.e. lefty, vegan, non-violent), and more about ...expecting people to hold repugnant views, and having at some level to 'get-along.' That's not to say there aren't going to be occasions where you will need to confront views you disagree with, but that it is easier sometimes when there is mutual respect and the awareness that there's*

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<sup>220</sup> Phone interview with Sandra, December 14, 2005.

<sup>221</sup> Matt Hern and Stu Chaulk's article "Roadgrading Community Culture: Why the Internet is so Dangerous to Real Democracy" ([http://www.democracynature.org/dn/vol6/hern\\_chaulk\\_internet.htm](http://www.democracynature.org/dn/vol6/hern_chaulk_internet.htm)).

*a strong likelihood that you will have to face each-other on a fairly regular basis.*"<sup>222</sup>

Many of us want community so badly that we believe technology can deliver it to us.

Steven Jones has written about the false promise of "any technologies, not just the Internet, which promise to reduce that complex to a singularity, or at least a unity, [which] will only deepen our sense of loss and estrangement from life and from others."<sup>223</sup> "Restoration is what...we really seek from technologies of communication" and some point out the futility of such restoration through technology.<sup>224</sup> They do so through an articulation of the difference between place and space, community and network. Some critics like Jones, fear this leads to a more disrupted sense of time and place. New media and such networks as have been described in this case study do afford unschoolers to experience connections with others of like-mind. "This is the battle in the new virtual communities. Armed with the tools of communication one can construct a wide network of connected voices, differing in timbre and substance, yet sharing a love of communication, forging primary bonds with strangers that seem otherwise impossible in mass society. Or, if one chooses, it is possible to never meet, never speak, and never understand those whom you don't want to, spending your days living in a virtual ghetto."<sup>225</sup> In America today, a general anxiety exists about the political repercussions of people only communicating with other likeminded folks through CMC, as in the main critique of the blogosphere being an *echo chamber*. While research from the *Pew Internet and American Life Project* reports that most people don't stay within their own

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<sup>222</sup> Email interview with Beatrice and Randy March 20, 2006.

<sup>223</sup> p.33, Steven Jones, *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cybersociety*.

<sup>224</sup> p.32, Steven Jones, *Virtual Culture: Identity & Communication in Cybersociety*.

<sup>225</sup> p.72, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

political spheres online,<sup>226</sup> the anxieties about emergent technology in society remain—what Huhtamo calls “topoi” or common reactions at the birth of new media forms.<sup>227</sup> These topoi reveal an American concern about a more polarized public, ignorant and uncaring about consensus.

While I admit that unschoolers stick by their belief that *school is bad*, they must constantly defend their beliefs and talk newcomers through the paradigm-shift. They are not ignorant of other points of view, lost in their own world. Rather their ideology is one constantly being constructed, defended, and challenged. The technology debate within the unschooling subculture interests me precisely because this point of tension shows the dynamic way in which the subculture continues to redefine itself. Further, it’s not so much two camps, as it’s more often two camps within one person.

But what is it about new media networks that gives rise to such suspicions among anti-tech unschoolers? Steven Colbert has said it's not the truth that the public wants from news want but “truthiness.”<sup>228</sup> Is the unschooling virtual community really just communityishness? Or is it authentic? The technocratic critique argues that online networks further aggravate the alienating social predicament in which we find ourselves.

In the void of any semblance of community in the past (how many years? Since the

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<sup>226</sup> “[P]rominent commentators have expressed concern that growing use of the internet would be harmful to democratic deliberation. They worried that citizens would use the internet to seek information that reinforces their political preferences and avoid material that challenges their views. That would hurt citizens’ chances of contributing to informed debates. The new survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project in collaboration with the University of Michigan School of Information survey belies those worries. It shows that internet users have greater overall exposure political arguments, including those that challenge their candidate preferences and their positions on some key issues” ([http://www.pewInternet.org/PPF/r/93/press\\_release.asp](http://www.pewInternet.org/PPF/r/93/press_release.asp)).

<sup>227</sup> *From Kaleidoscopic to Cybernerd: Notes Towards an Archaeology of Media.*

<sup>228</sup> I’m totally stealing this reference from Cory Doctorow, in reference to writing science fiction (from a ProjectNML interview 2006). And it’s really interesting to see how the Pew research flattens the distinction between virtual and real life community, between networking and community, communityishness and community. A Pew study from Jan 2006 says: “Barry Wellman (1999, 2001) has shown how this shift from solitary communities to social networks began before the Internet. Yet the Internet surely has accelerated the change. It has made it easy for people to connect without living nearby and without knowing each other well. It has probably increased the variety of the kinds of people who are network members. Where once communication was confined to neighbors (usually similar in ethnicity and social status), it is now more diversified, bridging multiple social worlds” (Jeffrey Boase et al., *Pew Internet & American Life Project: Strength of Internet Ties*, [http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Internet\\_ties.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Internet_ties.pdf)).

Industrial Revolution? Since post-WWII?), perhaps this “connectivity” feels “communityish.” Unschooling anti-tech folks would say this feeling of “communityishness” is a delusion—a networked hallucination, MacLuhan might have said. In a sort of Marxist critique, one could see how *buying into* this online world entails jumping through a portal to a debased, commercialized pop culture. Anti-tech unschoolers equate buying into new media with tacitly supporting just another instantiation of the technocratic, commercial society. This is not unlike the criticism of fan culture, which doubts that fan participation can be ultimately empowering. Duncombe writes that *Star Trek* fans, for instance, “are continually betrayed in their quest to make the culture theirs, and the process of connection must be continually reinvented, ad infinitum.”<sup>229</sup> Along this train of thought, those who use the technocratic critique believe that new media, by removing people from their real environments, only serves to widen the gap between have and have-nots on a fundamental level.<sup>230</sup> Because the notion of authentic community is so crucial to unschooling, opting out of the place of community in favor of the space of virtual community becomes genuinely problematic for many unschoolers.

Those unschoolers who fully embrace high tech media and technology often come from the computer geek tradition of subversion. Hackers’ and open-sourcers’

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<sup>229</sup>p.113, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

<sup>230</sup> Rob Reich, in his *Civic Perils of Homeschooling*, turns this line of argument against homeschooling in general: “Let me put the matter quite simply. Customizing a child’s education through homeschooling represents the victory of a consumer mentality within education, suggesting that the only purpose that education should serve is to please and satisfy the preferences of the consumer.” This criticism is quite ironic given that most unschoolers are ideologically opposed to mass consumerism. It reflects the double bind of a Marxist philosophy: how do you ever escape the Capitalist system? If you choose not to take part, you do so by boycotting, which in this case can be construed as cherry picking. Additionally, I feel the technocratic critique has entrenched anti-tech unschoolers into a “transmission model” of communication, at least when it comes to CMC (p.72-3, James Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*). I discussed in Case Study #1, the practice of listening is participatory in the Bakhtinian sense. But anti-tech unschoolers conceptualize reading or listening with computers or playing videogames in a more black and white way—simply as *consuming*—that is “signal received.” Many anti-tech unschoolers make a distinction between reading a book and reading online. It comes down to what I see as a not very nuanced theory of the consumption of media according to Marxist readings.

practices—while high tech—are DIY as well, often with an emphasis on social change. But too often there's not enough outreach and communications with populations in need; this is one aspect of the Digital Divide. Open-source projects end up being a sort of cultural capital, like a code that speaks about radical social change but that only other programmers can read. "To get such capital, people must act as individual Internet entrepreneurs."<sup>231</sup> The pro-tech unschoolers would definitely see the benefits of this. As independent thinkers, they choose to come together to do activities with other unschoolers or other Americans who have similar belief systems and common interests. People see this as the Libertarian streak in unschooling and in new media frontierism. The unschooling subculture has such a strong belief in keeping these networks nonhierarchical and ad hoc in order to never impose on another's freedom. On the other hand, it's hard to get organized, get anything done, or reach out to those who you wouldn't be hanging out with anyway.<sup>232</sup> Unschoolers' subculture is so anti-commercialization, it's really hard to make any money off of unschoolers.<sup>233</sup> You go to a conference and there's not much to buy because there's a core resistance to pre-packaged curricula. This isn't a necessarily bad thing at all. Networks stay uncluttered by carpetbaggers, but on the other hand, the movement finds itself in the ghetto of American capitalism. These organizational, cultural, and economic factors reinforce unschooling's

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<sup>231</sup> p.42, Jeffrey Boase et al., *Pew Internet and American Life Project: Strength of Internet Ties* ([http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP\\_Internet\\_ties.pdf](http://www.pewInternet.org/pdfs/PIP_Internet_ties.pdf)).

<sup>232</sup> According to Stephen Duncombe, "This model is the very essence of a libertarian community: individuals free to be who they want and to cultivate their own interests, while simultaneously sharing in each other's differences. It allows people the intimacy and primary connections they don't find in mass society, but with none of the stifling of difference that usually comes with tight-knit communities. This type of association has long been the dream of anarchism, parallels the hopes of multiculturalism, resonates with the virtual community of the Internet, and describes the ideal of the place that is bohemia" (p.52, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*). Mitchell Stevens writes about the difference in organizational structures between unschoolers and Christian Fundamental homeschoolers in his book *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*. The religious homeschoolers have become a political lobbying force to be reckoned with, while the unschoolers remain off the mainstream radar, for the most part.

<sup>233</sup> I also discuss this consciously economically unviable model in the fifth case study.



status as a small, underground, and not all that influential network—its true meaningfulness unbeknownst to all except those who drop out and tune in.

While media objects and authors (especially Holt and the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*) do hold special places in the network, unschoolers hold up the ideal of unschooling as the authority.

## **Conclusion**

Unschooling, as viewed through the unit of analysis of networks, appears to be a subculture in the dynamic process of defining itself. Innovation and conflict are necessarily part of this process. The unschoolers practice their conception of de-hierarchical, grassroots networks; this practice simultaneously polices the boundaries of the subculture. The informally canonized unschooling texts can be held up because of those authors' ability to speak to the underlying essence of unschooling—that love of learning philosophy. Simultaneously, they allow unschoolers enough space to invent their own mix-n-match participatory practices. Thus, no outright methodology gets reproduced through unschooling networks. Unschoolers reproduce these subcultural structures through initiation into the practices and constant, conscious discussion of how to practice non-hierarchical networks.

Geographically dispersed unschoolers come to practice networking as an integral part of their unschooling. Such activities as writing to authors, hosting other unschoolers, finding mentors in your community, reaching out to newcomers online, as well as other instantiations, make up the unschooling practice of networking. Much of this happens face-to-face through social connections and conferences, but social networking software

such as MySpace, flickr, del.icio.us, and Friendster, as well as other Web 2.0 technology such as podcasts and blogs, allow the techno-enthusiastic unschoolers to read-write their networks through user-generated content and archives. Networking is not just a skill, then, but part of the unschooling way of life.

As my unit of analysis encompasses the networks of geographically dispersed population of unschoolers, tensions between virtual space and real life place arise as a matter of course. In the 60s and 70s, the urban-rural dichotomy was an axis along which unschooling identity stretched and affected the sense of community in everyday practice. The global space of the Internet and the local place of unschooling communities intersect and reinforce each other, in the case of Vlad's open-source activities, Carsie's networking, and Kathryn's creative role-playing. Hybrids of the real and the virtual coexist, and more and more inform each other. Still, debates about the authenticity of space vs. place continue to spark conversation among unschoolers.

The role technology should play in networking is a source of tension within the subculture and within the psyche of individual unschoolers. A critical consciousness tradition keeps unschoolers as a community of practice engaged in negotiating its identity and its practices. Unschoolers, because of their critical consciousness about social, cultural, economic, and political factors, call virtual community into question. Many harbor ambivalence, if not outright rejection for the notion, casting doubt upon the political viability of such networks and seeing them contributing to the alienation and fragmentation of contemporary life. As Carsie boils it down, "there are two camps...

There's political activism that wants to change and then there's the back-to-the-land that wants to just scrap the whole thing and grow some food."<sup>234</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> March 10, 2006 phone interview with Carsie.

**Case Study #4**  
**Unschooling the Researcher:**  
*Legitimizing IM & TV*

**Introduction**

With this case study, I frame the family dynamic as it relates to my experiences as a researcher trying to understand the paradigm-shift and take part in media practices in a legitimate way. I use the event of the IM interviews with several family members as an entry point into a discussion of how the family considers the medium of IM legitimate and how my use of the medium intersects with their interests as technophile, “radical” unschoolers.

Many of my unschooling informants don’t own TVs or have rules about watching TV. Through the medium of IM, I also interviewed Sandra about her family’s legitimizing practices of watching TV as a family. I address the notion of media practices playing a role in “detoxing.” Television, the most maligned medium in the unschooling subculture, provides a telling site for the negotiation of the unschooling identity as it relates to ideological conceptions of freedom.

This case study also provides a look into the possibilities for linguistic anthropological research in unschooling. I discuss the importance of the paradigm-shift and the way this discursively frames interactions between researcher and informant.

**Background**

When I first contacted Sandra Dodd to ask if I could interview her, she wrote back: “I have a suggestion which might or might not be useful. It might be good to do a short interview, think for a day or three, and then call back with remaining questions. A few times my responses seem to have surprised and flustered an interviewer and things fizzled some because they weren't prepared, or thought they could learn all about it (whatever ‘it’ was in that instance) in one conversation. The newer and less connected to familiar material, the harder it will be to understand, and unschooling is pretty unconnected from most accepted ‘truths.’”<sup>235</sup> Sandra, who appears in many photographs with her glasses propped up on her head, has a quick wit and charisma. She’s intensely intelligent with a knack for humorously revealing the ridiculous.

She did have a way of making me flustered, but after our first phone interview, I persisted and she continually responded to my IMs and emails. She offered more challenges to my thinking, anecdotes and insights into her personal philosophies about unschooling.



Sandra has always unschooled her three children, nineteen-year-old Kirby, seventeen-year-old Marty and fourteen-year-old Holly. She also writes prolifically about unschooling on the web—through message boards, unschooling websites and her personal website. She’s well known in the unschooling subculture a vocal proponent of “radical” unschooling, which means giving the child as much freedom as possible. The family lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where Sandra’s husband works as an

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<sup>235</sup> From Sandra’s email, December 11, 2005.

engineer. Sandra had worked as a public school teacher. Now she stays at home with the kids and regularly speaks at unschooling conferences.

I heard about Sandra a number of ways. Her name appeared on the *Live and Learn Conference* website.<sup>236</sup> During interviews with a couple other unschoolers, they brought up her name as an unschooler who falls on the pro-technology side of that debate. Her website also popped up when I was Googling for unschooling and the Society for Creative Anachronism, a medievalist culture and historical reenacting group.<sup>237</sup> In perusing her writings online, I was particularly impressed by the way Sandra writes about unschooling using metaphors that amount to expressive vernacular theories of practice. Most of our correspondence focused on the role of media and technology: how unschoolers integrate it into their everyday lives and the tensions that arise about these practices within the unschooling movement.

### **Intro Sandra and the Kids' Social Use of Media**

Sandra was also one of the few unschoolers who offered to let me—even encouraged me—to get in touch with her kids. I felt this reflected not just her openness to myself as a researcher, but also the freedom with which she and her kids communicate

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<sup>236</sup> “Picture a long weekend where you and your children won't be asked ‘So, what curriculum do you use?’” <http://liveandlearnconference.org/>.

<sup>237</sup> Sandra has been involved in the SCA since before the kids were born. Now Sandra says she's not as active as she used to be, though her kids and husband often leave for weeklong “wars.” Sandra had been head of the SCA during the 1980s, before the Society grew to be as large as it is today. She described to me how, during her tenure, a former member had sued the SCA. The lawsuit called into question the SCA's charter, which framed the Society as an educational 501-3c organization. Sandra told me that the “arguments were made at the board-of-directors/corporate level. My descriptions and defense helped cause it not to go to court.” Her experience of articulating and defending “how you learn without it being classes” stayed with her. A number of the families I interviewed were involved in the SCA. I address the type of learning that results in the practice of role-playing and reenacting in the second case study. Unfortunately, there's not enough space in this thesis to fully explore this rich site of historical reenacting further. My interest in the SCA and reenacting stems from a documentary I'd been working on about a family of Civil War reenactors and a subsequent paper for Henry Jenkins at MIT. This family, the Puglieses, is now mostly involved in vintage dance and the girls have branched out into cosplaying contemporary pop culture—such as *Megatokyo* and Hogwarts from *Harry Potter*. It turned out that many of these families, though dispersed across the country, knew each other through the SCA. I found that one of my informants, David Friedman, had named his son after Patri Pugliese. <http://www.sca.org/>

through media and technology. She gave me their MySpace urls, IM screen-names and emails. Her youngest, Holly, soon emailed me, “We all have AIM, and that might be the easiest way to reach us. although, all of us are probably on myspace just as much <g>”<sup>238</sup> Sandra and her kids all seem very comfortable and able to express themselves with various types of communication tools. They have grown up integrating media and technology into the ways they communicate with each other and others.

In this case study, I build on the previous case studies’ discussion of situated, social learning and extend it to even more mediated environments. A linguistic anthropological approach is useful here. For example, while IMing with Sandra, I noticed that she uses <g>, which is an emoticon meaning “grin” from the early days of the Internet.<sup>239</sup> I subsequently noticed that her kids use this emoticon too, not unlike a manner of speech picked up from their mom. While it’s just one little IM turn of phrase, it struck me as a trace of Sandra’s participation in her kids’ mediated lives, in contrast to the generation gap that exists for many, many young people at the time of my research. Sandra’s kids, so it seems, learned their IM language from her language, reminiscent of her earlier years on Usenet.

At the moment, American parents are wary of IM and many unschooling parents share these suspicions. Eli, the eleven-year-old featured in the second case study, spoke with me about using IM to chat with his friends. When he overheard his dad gently denigrating such forms of communication because they aren’t face-to-face, Eli piped in, defending IM by explaining that he uses the emoticons to full effect. While Marc gave me a bit of a knowing look like “big deal,” Eli continued to speak enthusiastically about

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<sup>238</sup> February 8, 2006 email from Holly.

<sup>239</sup> Mitchell Stevens refers to the <g> used in a 1992 online session with a homeschooler as meaning “cyber grin” (p.148, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*).

IM. He described the different acronyms and abbreviations he enjoys using and the fun of making up new ones with his friends. He explained to me that IM is known for these. Not only was Eli's defense lost on his father, but Marc also dismissed the entire speech genre of IM as trifling and inadequate. The legitimization of a practice, I would contend, has a large part to do with whether or not the whole family participates in the practice and its related complex uses of language and media.<sup>240</sup>

Sandra described to me how she and the kids all use IM, sometimes to communicate with each other from the various rooms of their house, since they all have computers in their bedrooms as well as Sandra having one "in an office of her stuff" as Kirby put it.<sup>241</sup> She told me how she can tell

whether her kids are online by when their screen icons pop up. IM provides the family with "another connection. It's like there's this physical layer and there's another overlay. I can see who's online. We can see each other kind of.



We can see with Instant Message who's online. It's like that clock in *Harry Potter* that points to where people are...I guess that it's sort of a virtual house. But when you know the people, it doesn't feel so virtual."<sup>242</sup> For all of them, it's a way of touching base while having the freedom to move about as they please. For instance, one evening I was doing an IM interview with Sandra as she prepared dinner for the rest of the family as

<sup>240</sup> I would contend that Eli's defense of IM takes up what Bakhtin described as the complexities of "utterance." According to Sherry Turkle, emoticons, "onomatopoeic expletives and a relaxed attitude toward sentence fragments and typographic errors suggest that the new writing is somewhere in between traditional written and oral communication" (p.183, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*). While Marc doubts the social authenticity of IMing, Eli's mom Sue chimed in that the unschooler in her thinks of IM as an excellent way of learning spelling: informal, social and fun. Thus this family legitimates IMing in a different way.

<sup>241</sup> From my third IM session with Kirby, March 13, 2006.

<sup>242</sup> From my phone interview with Sandra, December 14, 2005.



they drove the several hour trip back from an SCA event. She mentioned this to me, and as we chatted, I noticed that Kirby came online. I sent him a message and we IMed through his mobile device. I playfully passed on his ETA to Sandra. This sort of “triangulation” becomes a way for family members to stay in touch, but also a way for me to take part, in some small way. It was indicative of our common understanding about the role of technology and media.

Sandra expressed her facility with technology as a communication tool—through words in interviews but also in practice. She sent me a number of links, advised me on keywords to search, suggested other people to contact through their websites, and even emailed me a transcript of an IM with Holly. She framed this email as a sort of evidence for how smart—beyond any schooler’s expectations—Holly is. She also framed the email as an example of “everyday computer use at our house”:

**a tidbit for you Re: thesis work on unschooling** [Inbox thesis](#)

☆ Sandra Dodd to me [More options](#) 12/30/05

Here's a good example of everyday computer use at our house. This is from Holly. She and her dad and I are going 200 mile to visit his parents (her grandparents), leaving at 10:00 this morning. I went to sleep before she did. Gudrun is our dog. When I came in to the computer this morning, there was a pending instant message:

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BlazingOranges: It's about 2:45 or so now. I ended up watching all of the 40 year old Virgin with Kirby and David. have an alarm set for nine.

Gudrun I guess has one or two hurt paws so I got her a blanket for the couch because when she first sat down she was kind of shaky and kept slipping on the cloth-- I don't know if it helped that much.

I got a corn bag for her and I hope I'm going to sleep soon. maybe check on Gudrun when you get the chance =\

Bye!

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It's also an example of the writing of someone who never took an English course, never had a spelling lesson outside of discussion and explanation when she asked a question. If she had been writing for public view, I'm sure she would have gone back and capitalized, but other than that... not bad.

This event reveals an unschooling mom advocating for her media and learning practices and also for her children. Sandra and I, as a researcher, communicated through the very idioms taken up by this thesis research. It was through this sort of modeling and legitimizing participation that I came to gain a greater understanding of the family's unschooling practices.

### Unschooling IM, TV and other Maligned Media

The researcher in me wants to say that Sandra's family considers such activities as videogames, IMing, and watching TV fertile ground for educational discussions and social interactions. However, Sandra would correct my phrasing and say that her family doesn't "use" media and technology according to some methodology. For them, learning takes place in a fluid way in a social environment inflected with mutual interest. Kirby and I chatted online about the SCA event and *World of Warcraft*, which the family considers a legitimate way of spending one's time. "Yeah! I have an entire group of



Screenshot of Kirby's World of Warcraft gameplay (courtesy Kirby Dodd)

friends that i've met through cards and WoW (world of warcraft)."<sup>243</sup> Kirby sent me screenshots from the game-play, and captioned one as "40 people working towards a common goal." David, an unschooling dad in California, described how his family all play *World of*

*Warcraft* together.<sup>244</sup> Both his and Sandra's family members have complete freedom to

<sup>243</sup> From my February 20, 2006 IM session with Kirby. *World of Warcraft* is an MMPORG, a massively multi-player online role-playing game (<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com>).

<sup>244</sup> From a February 18, 2006 phone interview with David. David's son also plays D&D in addition to the SCA and *World of Warcraft*.

play videogames, make objects for role-playing, IM with friends, watch TV as much as they like. This practice usually happens together with friends or family, engaging in dialogue about the media together. David confirms that most of what he learned during his own childhood was picked up at dinner table discussion and so forth.<sup>245</sup> Unschoolers enmesh learning with media and technology within the practice of everyday life within family dynamics.

While the unschoolers' cultural construction of learning renders learning less distinct and objective than school learning (their whole point is that learning shouldn't be something outside of oneself and the flow of everyday life), there's still a guiding intentionality at play. In fact, during the course of an IM session with Sandra one day, she spoke about letting her kids watch programs that many unschoolers wouldn't allow (if they indeed even have a TV). Sandra told me about watching *Beavis and Butthead* with her kids and having philosophical discussions about the meaning of Cornholio. Sandra used this as an example when talking with an anti-TV friend of hers: She "said she didn't like those, didn't get them [*Beavis and Butthead*]. I said my favorite part was Cornholio. I reminded her of the inspiring zen-rific phrase 'No matter where you go, there you are,' and Cornholio said the same thing, but he said 'You cannot run from your own bunghole.' That's philosophy."<sup>246</sup> *The Simpsons*, according to Sandra, also fuel a lot of fun and reflective talk. In *Unschooling*, Jason Marsh's documentary about three, Californian unschooling families, Aaron's mom Anne refers to *Star Trek*: "We would watch as a family. The topics that they covered, especially in the *Next Generation* are

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<sup>245</sup> David comes from a very erudite family (he's the son of economist Milton Friedman), which speaks to the self-selection of unschoolers as a generally very intellectual group. While unschoolers don't say that parents *have* to be highly educated, they'll admit that it helps. At the very least, unschoolers need to care deeply about learning. Why else would they reorganize their lives so drastically?

<sup>246</sup> From my phone interview with Sandra, December 14, 2005.

just phenomenal, in terms of politics, ethics, history. They talk a lot about physics.”<sup>247</sup>

Here we can see how the family watching TV as a social group, frames the content in a dialogic way. The content of the programming acts as a springboard—sometimes for critical reflection and sometimes for lateral connections. While it doesn’t have to be “high culture” media, the intention is to find deeper meaning or create personal relevance with the material.

### **Unschooling the Researcher**

Because Sandra takes such a “radical” stance with media and technology, I was curious to talk to the kids about their attitudes. One afternoon, Holly and I chatted online for a while, mostly about Holly’s interest in making art out of junk and reused materials like soda cans. I was interested in getting her perspective on unschooling parents who limit how much time their children spend on “screen time”—a phrase coming into common usage to refer to media with screens such as computers, TV, gaming, and anything else, I suppose, with a screen.<sup>248</sup> I asked Holly if she’d heard of “screen time.” She hadn’t and when I tried to explain it to her, she got confused. Holly said, she guessed she just didn’t hang out with families that operate that way. The next thing I know, Sandra is writing through Holly’s IM. Sandra: “This is Sandra-the-mom for a minute...Holly was getting frustrated. I wanted to tell you a story and make a suggestion...Once when Kirby was about the age Holly is now, someone was

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<sup>247</sup> *Unschooling*, by Jason Marsh, 2005.

<sup>248</sup> “Screen time” has been appearing on the pages of parenting magazines, government health organizations, and school memos sent home to parents. The government defines it as “TV, DVD, video games and non-school- or work-related computer and Internet use” (<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/public/heart/obesity/wecan/live-it/screen-time.htm>). Fascinating how they make the distinction between computer use for work/school and leisure. “Screen time” is an ideological construct that reveals much about Americans’ organization of their lives, particularly their time. This relates to my writings on the unschoolers’ conception of time in the *Introduction the Five Unschooling Case Studies*.

interviewing him and asked him whether he liked unschooling better than school. He looked at the guy levelly and said simply, ‘I have no basis for comparison.’ ... It’s hard for researchers and interviewers who were (or are) in school to talk to unschoolers. Very different mindset. <g>”<sup>249</sup> In this case, Holly was reacting no doubt to my clumsy questioning through a medium which does, regrettably, only afford emoticons rather than the subtle cues of gesture or tones of voice. But more than anything, at this moment during my interview with Holly, I was thrown by Sandra’s takeover. It felt to me like a loss of agency in the interview process.

Taking a step back, I see that this event in and of itself reveals the family’s interpersonal dynamic, thoroughly interconnected through their talk and media technology. At least from my end, there was a fluidity with which Sandra intercepted my line of questioning. Sandra put me in my place as an outsider. She made me realize I was a “researcher and interviewer” with a “very different mindset.” As a vocal unschooling mother who had agreed to show me the way pro-tech unschoolers conceptualize learning with media tools, she was stepping into her role not only as defender of unschooling, but also as a guide, who would help me—if only I would be up for the journey.

Being “a researcher” felt distancing.<sup>250</sup> Being a researcher in school (and such elite, schoolish schools like Harvard and MIT!) did not help.<sup>251</sup> Sandra often corrected

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<sup>249</sup> From my IM interview with Holly/Sandra, February 8, 2006.

<sup>250</sup> When I later shared my writing with Sandra, she revealed that it wasn’t so much her taking over the interview, but that Holly had asked her to. “The story about me taking over Holly’s IM was interesting from your side. Holly came and said she didn’t know what you meant and she didn’t want to talk anymore because she didn’t know what to say and she had other IMs and would I talk to you. I didn’t figure you needed to know all that so I just said she was frustrated”(April 30, 2006 email from Sandra). <Ouch> I’d found myself on Lave and Wenger’s *periphery* and failed to move in closer.

<sup>251</sup> I do make a distinction between my experiences at these two universities, in how “schoolish” they are, MIT being much less so, much more DIY. I went about my education as someone who learned how to do well on tests, but then used my reputation as a responsible student to study what I was really interested in. For instance, I took extra foreign language classes rather than calculus in high school. At Harvard, I majored in the Visual and Environmental Studies department. There I could make photography projects and documentary films with a small group of peers and be on a first-name basis with professors who were mostly working artists themselves.

me by saying things like, “it’s really hard to stop thinking in terms of school especially when you’re in school, especially when you’re studying school...Everything with school-colored glasses. I’m going to go ahead and say what I’m going to say. I’m not trying to put you on the spot or anything but,” and she paused and then went on with emphasis, “*we’re not talking about school at all. You’ve looked at the difference between homeschooling and unschooling, right? ...I don’t think you can really get it in the next few months.*”<sup>252</sup> I had to prove to Sandra that I understood this paradigm-shift, which became a discursive frame in our discussions. I was relieved that she wasn’t one of my first interviews, when I certainly would have asked even more ignorant questions. I was conscious of phrasing the questions I asked in a way that conveyed at least a certain amount of understanding.

Because unschoolers have undergone this paradigm-shift, they invoke a radical questioning of language. This linguistic and philosophical theorizing happens through practice, through sensitive and direct communication with others. As a researcher, I became interested in this practice through talking with my informants and reflecting on it while writing this thesis. “I guess if we unschoolers—the people communicating online and at conferences—were in a different format of communication, if there were any decent way of communicating without words, then it wouldn’t matter. When people are talking, pretty much all you’ve got is words and pictures. So when people are talking about education and learning without having really, *really* having looked at those terms and laid them out to dry, we’re going to be using them in all kinds of all wrong ways.”<sup>253</sup> And so, Sandra threw down the linguistic gauntlet at me. In dealing with schoolish people

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<sup>252</sup> From a December 14, 2005 phone interview with Sandra.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

such as myself, unschoolers practice this de-familiarizing technique. Sandra attempted to make this new semiotic frame of reference visible to me. In engaging with her in this linguistic form of participation, I came to experience firsthand the practice of theorizing unschooling.

### **Unschooling Media: the Technology Debate**

Because of her sensitivity to such discursive frames, I was surprised Sandra didn't seem to fully understand—or perhaps she didn't want to give any credit to—the frame within which anti-tech unschoolers operate. Sandra has her reasons for being against the censoring of media according to form or content. When I asked her about anti-tech unschoolers' use of the technocratic critique, she dismissed its adherents as protectionist and overly concerned with aesthetics. She regarded such anti-technology unschoolers as overly concerned with “only having wooden toys in their homes” in order to fit the particular liberal, homespun aesthetic. I pushed back by saying that actually, many of the anti-technology unschoolers I've talked with eschew technology for hardcore philosophical reasons, and besides, many of the pro-tech unschoolers care about the aesthetics of design. Sandra responded by saying that in her experience, “when people come and say, it would be bad for my child because of X, I never see them be able to back it up with a solid argument. It's emotional. They just want to control them...I'm not hiding my kids from watching *Full Metal Jacket*. I'm not going to say No NO NO! If my boys want to watch *Full Metal Jacket* (they're 19 and 16, my boys), they're going to.”<sup>254</sup> For Sandra then, the politics of the debate—the power struggle—revolve around the

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<sup>254</sup> From my phone interview with Sandra, December 14, 2005.

freedom of the child. “Screen time” served as a topic Sandra and I used to talk about the technology debate. The intercepted IM interview continued:

*“...I do know the ‘Screen time’ phrase, especially in schools’ recommendations that parents limit it... Parents who think they’re going to be all the cutting-edge sensitive type control their children in some ways they deny to be ‘controlling.’... Before I came in here, I was asking Holly whether she didn’t know that another family we’ve known since before she was born had had anti-TV parents. She said she didn’t know. We used to be in a babysitting co-op with that family, but Holly was too little for the exchange... When Kirby was four or five, they had a nintendo and we didn’t, but [they] kept it up in the closet. Once Kirby played it, he always wanted to play it when he went over... Our simple solution to that was to buy him a Nintendo. After that, when he went to their house, he played in the yard. They only used their TV for the Nintendo (when it was out, for a measured session) or for videos (sometimes, not much). When those kids came to our house, they only wanted to watch TV... If TV has never been limited or demonized, it will never be so mesmerizing. There is another factor that will make it mesmerizing for children: depression and a need to escape. Kids who hate their lives are better off focusing on the TV so strongly that they don’t even see the wall behind it. Sometimes it’s their only way out of the room. ... But if the TV is just one of a myriad of interesting things, and the room is a happy place, and there are others watching TV and it will lead to conversations, singing, research, drawing, play-acting and dress-up, it’s not so mesmerizing. Years back in a chatroom discussion, someone who was adamantly anti-TV said kids watch it like zombies, without moving. I said my kids didn’t. Mine were up and singing and dancing, and rewinding to the good parts and watching the best songs again, as they had been the night before when The Sound of Music was on. In a great act of embarrassing circular reasoning, she said snootily that at HER house that would be unacceptable. At HER house, children were expected to sit quietly and not interrupt the program. She wasn’t smart enough to see what she had just said. Her kids were zombies because if they weren’t they got in trouble or were sent out.  
<g>”<sup>255</sup>*

Sandra lays out her argument against “screen time” through these anecdotes. She engages with the anti-tech critique around the elemental issue of human freedom—rather than the socio-cultural issue anti-commercialization. For her, the anti-commercialization critique rests on a bed of “snootiness,” not political struggle. Thus she negates the anti-tech parents’ critiques by calling them hypocritical—in favor of freedom, but only their

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<sup>255</sup> From my IM interview with Holly/Sandra, February 8, 2006.



version of freedom. This facet of the technocratic critique can be seen as the content side, rather than functional aspects of media.

The social practices of Sandra's family support their idea of freedom. When I asked Sandra about the conversations that go on around watching TV, say, she responded, "With unschooling, that just becomes part of the fabric of every single moment. A lot of people come and they go well, I would watch with my kids and I just can't stand it. And we say, well, can you just be in the room and just kinda pay attention? And then inevitably they say, ok, I watched *Pokemon* and it was kinda cool. It's like a basic laziness, like it's part of the separation of the kids and parents...With unschooling we try to encourage people to really talk about important things that the kids care about."<sup>256</sup> Sandra uses this anecdote to highlight some of the differences between her and anti-tech unschoolers in their conceptualizations of media and learning in relation to established hierarchies of cultural content and taste.

To really understand this difference, we need to unpack the other side of the debate. Television and its problematic role in the lives of unschoolers cropped up in my interactions with almost all of my informants, and the debate wasn't always framed around taste hierarchies and questions of content. As I talking with unschoolers and read unschooling texts, I most often encountered a flat out rejection of TV, but I was struck by the diversity of complaints, many of them focusing on the affordances and functionalities of the media form. Sometimes a distinction is made between different types of "screen time," such as in Llewellyn's *Teenage Liberation Handbook*: "Unlike TV, the Web really is intellectually (and even socially and emotionally and artistically) engaging and

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<sup>256</sup> From a December 14, 2005 phone interview with Sandra.

rewarding.”<sup>257</sup> In some cases, there was disagreement between the parents. Eli’s parents, Marc and Sue from Case study #2, have slightly different opinions on how media and technology should be integrated into Eli’s learning and life. Right now they’re thinking about keeping the TV in a closet, only taking out when there’s something they want to watch. Marc noted that he does make the distinction between media, not simply labeling all media with screens “screen time.” TV, he feels, is a passive medium and quoted the studies on eye movement as proving TV unhealthily puts kids in a zoned out trance and perhaps causes neurological damage. In some cases, the television brings an unusual discord to unschooling families, which usually operate without much friction. Heather, an unschooling mom in Los Angeles, feels conflicted about TV because it’s the focal point of most family arguments. Ken, who runs the North Star Learning Center for Teens, feels conflicted and finds “the authoritative kicking-them-off situation to be contradictory to most of the parenting style we’re trying to use.”<sup>258</sup> Many of my informants, such as Mary, Matt and Carsie, simply don’t own televisions, because it takes the issue off the table. While many Americans—not just unschooling parents—practice limiting, censoring, and/or banning television, unschoolers consciously grapple with the issue of “screen time.” Unschoolers ask the question, “What, if anything, is to be done about TV and screen time?” on a philosophical level.

Beatrice and Randy could serve as examples of unschooling parents who regard TV and computer technology with suspicion for a number of reasons. Beatrice explains why: “I expect my kids to be exploring, making their own stories, pursuing their creativity rather than following instructions from a machine... I really believe that when

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<sup>257</sup> p.172, Grace Llewellyn, *Teenage Liberation Handbook*.

<sup>258</sup> December 15, 2005 fieldwork with Ken Danford at North Star in Hadley, MA.

a child is young then they should be in the real world - using all their senses, moving about, especially in nature.”<sup>259</sup> Firstly, Beatrice’s critique echoes Marc’s: they consider TV and other media technology unhealthy because the child sits still too long, damages eyesight by staring, or risks neurological harm associated with dulled senses, lackluster intelligence, or attention deficit disorder wrought by *zoning out* or staring. Beatrice highlights these worries about the bodily wellbeing of her children in terms of developmental stages (“when a child is young”). Secondly, Beatrice centers her distinction between passive vs. active on whether the media form contains the means of production—thus allowing the child to “pursue their creativity.” Because Beatrice and Randy are political activists who produce their own community radio show about unschooling, we can read this as a political statement, relating to Illich’s radical desire to return the means of production back to the hands of the people. Because Beatrice and Randy “do a radio show, we use technology there-- from recording the interview, to editing the show on the computer to broadcasting it. The kids are involved in helping with selecting topics, formulating questions, interviewing and even editing on the computer.” But in setting up such production as active, it also assumes passivity in the act of consumption.

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<sup>259</sup> A.S. Neill writes a great deal about play and the outdoors in his book *Summerhill*. He wrote that for small children the line between fantasy and reality is blurred. Taking a stab at a sort of pseudo-cog-sci-Freudian analysis, this led me to a pet theory about the human developmental function of play: could it be that play is one of the practices through which human consciousness comes to recognize the difference between reality and fantasy? Perhaps assigning such a major significance to play will make us examine why adults express such anxiety about it: how much play is too much, how to use play as a reward after learning is completed, how children need to stop playing and grow up, how children need to just be children and play, etc. Unschoolers hold play in high regard. However, in the subculture, a debate stirs about what kind of play is authentic. For unschoolers like Beatrice, the “machine” is thought of as having a sort of authorial power (in the sense of author and authority). On the other hand, new media becomes flexible enough that kids can play with it with ease.

This conceptualization of consumption is the root of the difference between Sandra and Beatrice's view of technology and media.<sup>260</sup> However, it's not the project of this thesis to examine the various economic, scientific, cultural, and political negotiations that go into shaping emergent media forms—to be read-write and or simply read. Rather, I explore the cultural tensions in the very way unschoolers construct meaning about media and technology. I argue that Sandra's family approaches media consumption through a discourse of participatory practices. They see intellectual value in “textually poaching” pop culture materials, particularly through word play.<sup>261</sup>

This difference in the conceptualization of consumption results in diverging unschooling practices. Beatrice continues, “we use the computer to research and we watch movies once a week. The kids choose the movie no matter how dumb I find it. Sometimes I choose. Other times, I might bring home a movie from the library that I think we would benefit from watching--documentary, science, artful movies like Chicken run, history etc. I do that once a week.”<sup>262</sup> Sandra disagrees with the finer points of Beatrice's practice. Clearly, Sandra does not believe that pop culture is bad. For Sandra's family, the quest is to find meaning in the reading of any cultural text. Beatrice and Randy's family produces meaning by taking hold of the means of production and actively filtering out cultural materials. Other unschoolers lie somewhere in between. Heather

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<sup>260</sup> de Certeau calls for a reexamination of this “consumption-as-a-receptacle” which stems from the “myth of Education” and misguided “idea of producing a society by a ‘scriptural’ system”(p.166-7). “It is nonetheless implicit in the ‘producers’ claim to *inform* the population, that is, to ‘give form’ to social practices. Even protests against the vulgarization/vulgarity of the media often depend on an analogous pedagogical claim; inclined to believe that its own cultural models are necessary for the people [in the case of unschooling, the children] in order to educate their minds and elevate their hearts, the elite [in this case, anti-tech parents] upset about the ‘low level’ of journalism or television always assumes that the public is moulded by the products imposed on it. To assume that is to misunderstand the act of ‘consumption’”(p.166, *The Practice of Everyday Life*). Following Lisa Gitelman, I try to “bedevil the strict dichotomy of production and consumption, which is so familiar to accounts of the history of media and technology...The production-consumption dichotomy harbors a particular determinism: within it lurks a tendency to use technology as a sufficient explanation of social and cultural change. It puts production first”(p.61, “How Users Define New Media: A History of the Amusement Phonograph” in *Rethinking Media Change: The Aesthetics of Transition*).

<sup>261</sup> See *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* by Henry Jenkins.

<sup>262</sup> From my email interview with Beatrice, March 20, 2006.

admits that her family experiences “a lot of tension here by keeping the TV and doling it out. I have a lot of friends who don’t have it at all. Then I have a close friend who begs to differ, because she thinks the real unschoolers allow the kids to watch as much as they want. They call themselves radical unschoolers, because they don’t put controls on the kids. But I have a problem with how they use the word ‘radical’ but they’re allowing a lot of consumer culture into the household.”<sup>263</sup>

Perhaps many of the present day unschooling parents have this ambivalence towards their children’s practices with TV and computers because of their own usage, particularly from habits formed during their own upbringings. “My husband and I have wrestled with whether to have a TV,” Heather told me. “We grew up with it, so it’s almost harder on us [to resist it than the kids]. So we dole it out. We’re suspicious of it.”<sup>264</sup> Beatrice tells me that she herself feels bad about using such media too much. “Personally, I use the computer a lot, In fact, I find I use it too much. It’s horrifying to see how much I have become dependent on it and that worries me. I am trying not to spend so much time on it as like tv, it is a time guzzler.”<sup>265</sup> It follows that she’s hoping set a good example for her children. Ken at North Star admitted that he now looks back on his childhood and regrets how much time he spent watching TV. He sees his kids’ use of the Internet is fine—as long as it’s for retrieving information. “We restrict the amount of time they can be on. Screen time is bad. The process of sitting and staring and receiving passively...Reading a book is different.”<sup>266</sup> Unschooling parents grapple with their own media practices and try to model what they see as responsible use.

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<sup>263</sup> Phone interview with Heather December 6, 2005.

<sup>264</sup> Phone interview with Heather December 6, 2005.

<sup>265</sup> Email Interview with Randy and Beatrice March 20, 2006.

<sup>266</sup> Fieldwork with Ken December 15, 2005.

But has the nature of information retrieval changed? Sandra claims that “a person who turns away from all the cable television, DVD, Internet media that’s all around us everyday—anyone who turns the switch off on that and shoves a pile of books at their kids is not doing them a service... The information is all around us now, it’s not just in libraries and in textbooks.”<sup>267</sup> And further, have the very nature of media and subsequently playful, creative practices changed, creating a generational gap in participation? Today, kids remix content and creatively appropriate cultural materials. They move through online spaces to collaborate with other people. Fourteen-year-old unschooler, Kathryn had this to say about drawing and sharing her comics online:

*“[My] comic has been going on for about seven years now, and I just started putting it up on the Internet... I’ve filled five 1” binders and one 2” binder full of RAROMON and CaRlMaCs comics! :-) It originally started because I loved Pokemon. Then I met my friend Erica and she just happened to be making a comic very similar to mine ... Hers was called Eri-Balls and starred creatures called RAROMON and a RAROMON trainer named Cat. Soon our two comics ‘merged’ (our characters went into each others comics and the stories ended up being very similar)...And even though R&C was inspired by Pokemon, it’s completely different. (They still catch things in balls, but that doesn’t happen that much in the later ones, and battles have all but died out as the comic went on.) All of the characters are mine and my friend, Erica’s. Though most of them are mine because it’s my comic. It annoys me that it’ll never get published because people will say that I’m ‘copying Pokemon’ when I’m really not. All of the stories are mine and completely original.”<sup>268</sup>*

This excerpt reveals the extent to which young people growing up with new media and technology integrate these forms into their creative processes. The interplay between producing and consuming complicates the binary notion of either/or. Today, young people *play* with media, in the way their parents played with toys as kids. Reading her email above, I’m struck by the fluidity with which Kathryn and her friend’s comics intermingle. It sounds to me like two girls improvising a game of make-believe.

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<sup>267</sup> Phone interview with Sandra December 14, 2005.

<sup>268</sup> Email Interview with Joyce and Kathryn, March 4, 2006.

Because her play manifests through media forms, Kathryn also grapples with issues of intellectual property and originality, in an era where normative lines of legitimacy have not yet been drawn. I posit that anti-tech unschoolers have not experienced the playful ways in which young people use new media.<sup>269</sup> Therefore the important ramifications of these practices are not being fully addressed.

## **Conclusion**

This case study explores tension points centering on unschoolers' cultural construction of learning with media and technology. Sandra's practice of watching TV expresses her idea of radical unschooling on a number of levels. First, the adult does not impose a priori and biased notions about taste and educational value on the media object—this includes both content and media function. I described this as an anti-hierarchical reformulation of the parent-child dyad in my analysis of learning to read in Case Study #1. Secondly, Sandra describes the social dialogue surrounding the media object. In Case Study #2, I discussed the way language and knowing flow through dialogical learning. In this way, Sandra and her kids engage in building knowledge among themselves, but they also do this by building their own language, poaching it here and there from pop culture. Their way of watching TV then, does not stand isolated from, or necessarily oppositional to (as are many of the practices I will discuss in Case Study #5) a mainstream American socio-cultural context, also imagined and constituted through language and media. Thirdly, Sandra positions herself as someone who—by

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<sup>269</sup> Perhaps the anti-tech adults have not experienced with new media what Cook and Seely Brown called *the generative dance*: "[t]hat is, for human groups, the source of *new* knowledge and knowing lies in the use of knowledge as a tool of knowing within situated interaction with the social and physical world"(p.383, Cook and Seely Brown, "Bridging Epistemologies: The Generative Dance between organizational Knowledge and Organizational Knowing")

writing about her practice of unschoolish TV-watching, among other things—adds to the online unschooling “information, flowing like a river.”<sup>270</sup> She does this mainly through online unschooling networks, as described in the third case study.

This case study analyzes diverging conceptions of consumption and production, the politics of taste and the taste of politics, the role of sociability and play in consumption, and intergenerational conflicts.<sup>271</sup> The technology debate within unschooling marks a fundamental tension in a subculture that Mitchell Stevens named “inclusive.”<sup>272</sup> The debate sometimes degenerates into claims of being *more unschoolish than thou*. While unschoolers conceptualize and experience their practices, they engage in linguistic negotiations such as those mentioned by Susannah Sheffer in the *History/Historiography* chapter of this thesis, Sue’s “community learning” in Case Study #2, and Matt’s questioning of “virtual community,” and Sandra’s interpretation of “radical” freedom in this case. I notice these negotiations as part of my role as a go-between, not just with pro-tech and anti-tech but also as an outsider, a schooler.

The topic of this case study reveals the process by which Sandra and I come together to discuss the practice of unschoolish TV-watching. The interview process with pro-tech unschoolers gives added insights into their familiarity with technology. I tried to

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<sup>270</sup> From a December 14, 2006 phone interview with Sandra.

<sup>271</sup> How people were initiated into the practice of watching TV informs the way they conceptualize it. If one was brought up to “watch TV like a zombie,” chances are that person thinks TV has a siren’s call. This belies a conceptualization of consumption within the transmission-reception model of communications. It’s interesting to note that anti-tech unschoolers guard themselves against such media with metaphors of addiction. These thematic constructions of media forms also run through the history of media literacy. Such a media literacy approach seeks to protect vulnerable children from encroaching media by telling them to “just say no to TV” and “kill your television.” Another approach arms children with deconstructive tools to analyze MTV and cigarette ads, for instance. Still another trains children in making their own media (or in public schools, their own anti-smoking PSAs). According to de Certeau, readers and fans communicate about and through media, not simply along the “binomial set production-consumption,” but as simultaneous, dynamic producer-consumers, always “renting” space from the cultural real estate (p.168, de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*). “Reading thus introduces an ‘art’ which is anything but passive”(p.xxii, *ibid.*). See also Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*.

<sup>272</sup> Mitchell Stevens in fact discusses all the types of “other” homeschooling, of which unschooling is one type (p.20, *Kingdom of Children: Culture and Controversy in the Homeschooling Movement*).



put my study of media and technology into practice while interviewing Sandra and her family. At the level of language, I engaged with questions of linguistic paradigm-shifts and how those manifest in the social interactions between the family and myself as a researcher. This unit of analysis allowed me to experience the language of vernacular theory. Building on the previous case study with its unit of analysis of networks, this case study also investigates CMC and the real life social interactions that surround media objects and speak through media.

**Case Study #5**  
**DIY Subculture:**  
*Zines & Collective Participation*

**Introduction**

In this case study, I'm combining my interviews and observations, mainly from two separate families from different geographical areas. Both engage in DIY (Do-It-Yourself) practices, specifically making zines. I'm using this unit of analysis in order to reflect on the larger socio-cultural meanings of DIY media in the unschooling subculture. DIY practices—such as making zines, making and modifying clothing, underground music, crafting—have particular affordances which appeal to unschoolers, notably learning by doing or experiential learning. Whether the social aspects of these practices should happen in real life or through hybrid means with computer-mediated communication (CMC) remains a point of contention within the subculture. I explore how aesthetics and philosophy play into these ideological choices.

Cultural ways of making, consuming and distributing DIY media and objects result in a subculture of producer-consumers. I draw larger economic and political conclusions about these DIY models, namely DIY media as a site for the de-alienation of labor.

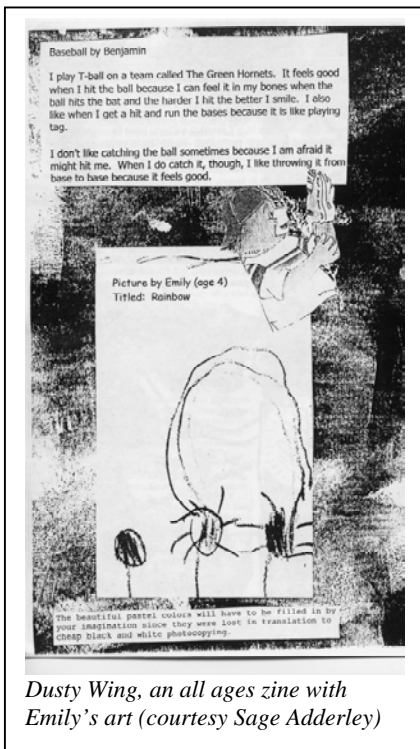
**Background: Sage and Emily**

A young mother with a punky style—arty glasses, dyed hair, piercings, and tattoos—Sage unschools her two small children, Emily and



Bella, in Philadelphia, PA. “We belong to an homeschooling group in our city. I think

about half are unschoolers. I think we lean more towards unschooling.”<sup>273</sup> I spoke with Sage over the phone after finding her through a number of websites: *Bust Magazine*, flickr.com, and her own website *Sweet Candy Distro*.<sup>274</sup> Sage’s husband Garrett works fulltime as a tattoo artist while she takes care of the kids and runs a website and zine distribution business out of their home. “That’s why I’m able to do as much as I’m able to do. I feel lucky and take advantage of being at home. I get to be creative and crafty... We made that decision early on. I knew when my first child was two that we



*Dusty Wing, an all ages zine with Emily's art (courtesy Sage Adderley)*

wanted to homeschool.” Sage represents a trend in Third Wave feminists who make the choice to stay at home. They have *mama-pride* in women’s work and the small-scale entrepreneurial spirit of work-at-home moms.<sup>275</sup> Sage and her husband’s lifestyle reflects a conscious decision to forego economic benefits of two fulltime incomes in favor of raising their own children. Below, I discuss further the socio-cultural, economic, political and educational implications of work-at-home parents making DIY crafts with their children. Do-It-

Yourself and independent media play a large part in the family’s life. Zines are homemade magazines made with a mix of original writing, collage and appropriated

<sup>273</sup> My interactions with Sage included flickr exchanges involving photographs, emails and a phone interview on December 3, 2005. All her quotes are taken from these.

<sup>274</sup> *Bust Magazine*’s website <http://www.bust.com/>; flickr.com is a socially networked photo-sharing website; Sage’s website through which she distributes zines: <http://eyecandyzine.com>.

<sup>275</sup> Unfortunately there’s not enough space in this thesis to fully explore the intersection of feminism and unschooling. I interviewed Judy Norsigian, one of the founders of *Our Bodies Ourselves* on December 3, 2005. Judy described how as an undergrad at Radcliffe in the late 60s, she’d taken a class with John Holt who was a visiting lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Surprised that Holt would have been welcomed at a school of education, Judy responded, “Oh yes. Those were wild times. He held his seminar in a yurt that the students built in the courtyard.” There’s a certain DIY impulse behind *Our Bodies Ourselves*. In this case study, Sage talks about “taking back”—and this notion of DIY empowerment is the element which binds unschooling and Third Wave Feminists.

photocopied materials. The final product is photocopied, stapled and usually given away to friends, swapped with other zinesters, or sold for small fees through mail order, at comicbook shops, independent bookstores or, increasingly, online. As for DIY's particular history, Sage told me DIY "has gone on forever. I know it was used then—in the 50s and 60s—as it is now: to form a community." Stephen Duncombe, who wrote the history of zine culture *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* in 1997, traces the roots of zines back to science-fiction fandom as far back as the 1930s and 40s, while also "shaped by the long history of alternative presses in the United States."<sup>276</sup>

Personally, I first became familiar with the term "DIY" through its usage in the punk and anarchist scene, specifically on punk records released on underground labels. Though it's difficult to trace the etymology, supposedly, the term "DIY" came into common usage in the 60s, loosely tied with Stewart Brand's *Whole Earth Catalog* and the back-to-the-land movement. Unschooling has a streak of this self-reliance.<sup>277</sup> Some anarchists feel that living by a DIY philosophy keeps human activity to its natural, sustainable limits. An example would be riding a bike and repairing it yourself, rather than supporting environmentally damaging cars with all their political baggage.<sup>278</sup> Over

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<sup>276</sup> p.6, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

<sup>277</sup> There may be something particularly American about this self-reliance, or at least Emersonian. For a sense of the internal, intergenerational conflicts of the back-to-the-land movement, see a zine called *Cometbus* #48 "Back to the Land" by Aaron Cometbus.

<sup>278</sup> I'm reminded of Cook and Seely Brown's "understanding of the tacit/explicit distinction [which they base] on the work of the scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi (1983)" of learning how to ride a bicycle (p.384, Cook and Seely Brown, "Bridging Epistemologies: The Generative Dance between organizational Knowledge and Organizational Knowing"). They theorize an interaction of knowledge—one can have the information of how one should ride a bike—while one also needs to put that knowledge into practice—knowing—in order to really be successful in riding a bike. While walking through Matt's neighborhood in East Vancouver, we happened upon some of the unschoolers from The Purple Thistle. They were having fun in a neighborhood soccer field with their homemade and modified bikes. This subculture goes by Choppers on the West coast and Skuls on the East coast. Not only do the kids build, modify and repair and self-style their own bikes, but they'd also made up a game. That day, we gathered to watch them do "bike jousting" on their high bikes—bikes that had been modified to be twice the height of a normal bike. They were using long PVC pipes as jousting sticks. They had a referee and everything. People were barbecuing and in some

the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century and into the 21<sup>st</sup>, DIY philosophy has continued to play out in American culture, ranging from issues of sustainability to anti-corporate/pro-local control. The driving motive behind DIY was—and is—a desire to save or resuscitate “an older model of production and consumption, a cultural model in which, to adapt the words of Dan Werle..., people were ‘entertainers of themselves’: a *participatory* model of culture.”<sup>279</sup> Underground music and copyright battles now manifest a DIY political struggle through the democratization of digital production tools and the advent of the Web 2.0.<sup>280</sup> Both DIY media and unschooling necessarily present critiques of mainstream society.

At this point, zines have a history of DIY, underground culture and politics, which means engaging in the very practices necessarily brings to bear social and subcultural notions of identity. According to Duncombe, zines are usually made alone, “a minority are run by small collectives, a majority accept input from others, but zines for the most part are the expression and product of the individual.”<sup>281</sup> Thus they serve as primarily expression for self-declared “losers” or people who feel they don’t fit into mainstream society but revel in the “virtual community” created by the circulation of zines.<sup>282</sup>

However, I’ve observed pockets of people in the same geographical area collaborating in

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cases, bleeding all over their black leather outfits. It reminded me a lot of an SCA event. This sort of activity goes even beyond the generative dance and includes expressions of subcultural identity, which in turn reinforce the practice.

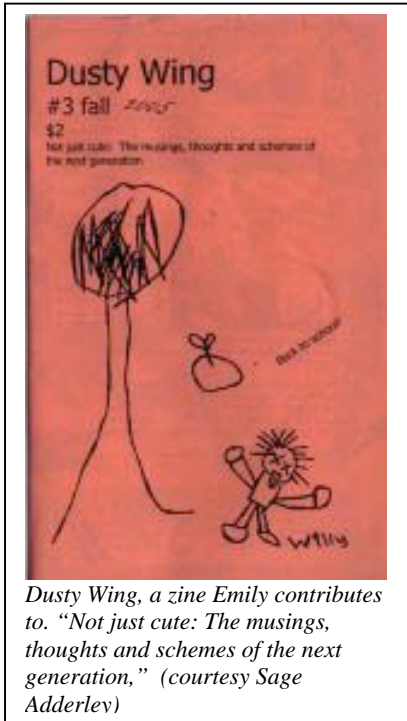
<sup>279</sup> p.106, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. Duncombe’s emphasis.

<sup>280</sup> Web 2.0 is the term used to describe the shape Internet is taking as many new online applications’ content is user-generated, editable, such as Wikipedia, for example, sharable, and serialized, as in RSS.

<sup>281</sup> p.12, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. Duncombe writes a bit about early American pamphleteers. “As Orwell points out, these early pamphlets were the words and ideas of individuals...The popular pamphleteer John Dickinson, for example, wrote a pamphlet as a letter ‘to his friend,’ using the pronouns ‘I’ frequently when making his points.”(p.27). This reminds me of the Jamaican Rastafarian linguistic usage of the pronoun “I” for all pronouns and insertion of the pronunciation of “i” in words. This signals a subcultural unity on the level of language, as well as a de-hierarchization of interpersonal speech. All people are referred to as “I” as a show of mutual respect and the belief that God lives in all human beings. These subversions unite a subculture.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p.20. “Webs of communication can offer the community, the support and the feeling of connection that are so important for dissent and creativity. One of these networks, these virtual spaces where bohemia still exists, is the network of zines”(p.55).

their production. I further detail these collaboratives in the second part of this case study with Matt's family and the unschooling center The Purple Thistle.<sup>283</sup> This case study explores the differences and similarities in how Sage and Matt's Purple Thistle group make socio-cultural meaning through the practice of making zines. In both instances, I argue that whether producing zines alone or in a group, zinesters engage in a subcultural



*Dusty Wing, a zine Emily contributes to. "Not just cute: The musings, thoughts and schemes of the next generation," (courtesy Sage Adderlev)*

activity that connects them to other people, who are united in being alone or weird in the eyes of the mainstream.

How unschoolers make this DIY media, what it looks like, how they share media objects and hold them in regard—these issues reveal continuities between print and material forms and new media forms. Many zinesters compile materials for zines without clear distinction between letter and “rant,” original and appropriated. They compose with an

informal, conversational voice. Holt and his *Growing Without Schooling* readers constructed their magazine in a very similar way, although in zines, the visual form is much more graphic, more deliberately unprofessional. Blogs and social networking websites build this sense of “virtual community” first instated by zines. These CMC subcultural practices hinge on personal expression and finding readers in a dispersed community of other practitioner-readers. With unschooling blogs, flickr groups, podcasts as well as zines, it comes down to a way of making media that resists control by an outside authority and that revels in the personal, the “real difference [which] is not to be

<sup>283</sup> The Papercut Zine Library in Cambridge, MA is another example. [Papercut@riseup.net](mailto:Papercut@riseup.net).

found on the fifty-plus [hundreds in 2006] channels on cable TV, but through searching for its expression in out-of-the-way places and through creating that expression oneself.”<sup>284</sup>

Because you can't get around the fact that zines are a self-consciously—rebelliously—obsolete medium, I chose to analyze them in relation to new media modalities. This reveals a subcultural tension, dating back to the radical critique of the 1960s and 70s. Some radical thinkers such as Illich imagined a utopian vision of technological media tools returned to the hands of the people. Others, as typified by the Free Speech movement, rejected “technocratic” society as a dystopia and sought a less mediated, less technologically infused way of life.<sup>285</sup> DIY media in the unschooling culture is an act of resistance. Because DIY media practices take place within a community, it reinforces the subcultural identity. And because this notion of community is so central to unschooling zinesters, they debate the notion of networks, as in Case Study #3, and whether “virtual community” is “oxymoronic” as Matt thinks it is—or whether it is authentic—as Sage thinks it is. Ultimately, taking part in such forms of DIY media encourages the unschooler to participate in the construction of this dynamic subcultural identity—beyond the community, whether virtual or real—on a meta-level of socio-cultural significance. As Duncombe wrote, “[a]lthough the world of zines operates on the margins of society, its concerns are common to all: how to count as an individual, how to build a supportive community, how to have a meaningful life, how to create something that is yours.”<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> p.24, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

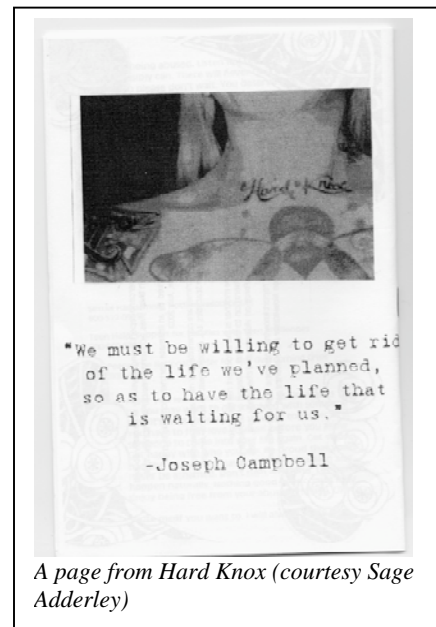
<sup>285</sup> See the *History/Historiography* chapter for more on the 60s and 70s theorizing of technology and media.

<sup>286</sup> p.15, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

## Sage & Emily: DIY Subculture & Zines as Oppositional Networks

For Sage, a particularly meaningful aspect of zines is the way they connect people who might otherwise feel isolated. For example, “women who are being abused or raped and they couldn’t be vocal about it publicly, used [zines] as a form of communication” and as a way to share their stories.<sup>287</sup> Sage’s description of the history of zines conveys the oppositional or underground modalities through which this media form flows,

carrying messages otherwise ignored or censored by mainstream society. “DIY is taking back yourself and your life, as opposed to being so dependent on society.” She sees school as a mainstream place where authority figures control media. “I can be more lenient and allow my kids to pursue what they want, as opposed to schools with books being banned. The whole *Harry Potter* thing blows me away. Schooling is more of a factory-like setting. Have you read books



A page from *Hard Knox* (courtesy Sage Adderley)

by John Gatto?”<sup>288</sup> Sage uses the *Harry Potter* book banning in public schools as an example of just how oppressive mainstream society and, by extension, the space of public schools can be—specifically regarding access to media. In a sense, she emphasizes how

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<sup>287</sup> Sage decided to write her zine “*Hard Knox* which is the true story of my domestic abuse experience because I feel the subject matter is till unfortunately taboo. Too many victims are still keeping it inside and feeling shameful. I wanted to release the heavy weight of my horrific encounter ... as well as open the doors for any other victims who needed to feel like they weren't alone. It was very therapeutic for me.” Sage also had the script “*Hard Knox*” tattooed right above her collarbones. “I decided to get it because it is a constant reminder that I am a survivor. It keeps me in check when times are difficult that I have been through so much and I have the strength to overcome anything I put my mind to.” (From Sage’s April 19, 2006 emails to me.) Cynthia Conti’s CMS 2001 thesis *Stepping up to the Mic: Le Tigre Strategizes Third Wave Feminism through Music and Performance* is about the DIY punk feminist band Le Tigre. Conti explores such therapeutic and empowering DIY media practices in the Riot Grrrl movement.

<sup>288</sup> See the *History/Historiography* chapter for unschoolers’ narrative of the movement. John Taylor Gatto’s book *The Underground History of American Education* has come to play a central role in how unschoolers imagine themselves in opposition to a mainstream status quo and indeed a mainstream version of history.



bad it's gotten if even *Harry Potter* gets suppressed. She then references Gatto, as most of my informants do, as the narrator of an alternative vision, with his *Underground History of American Education*, published in 2001. Gatto lays out a flipside to the history of American education: a training ground for factory-worker drones, co-opted by the forces of the great Industrialists and capitalism. This strong narrative forms a referential frame through which unschoolers—as Benedict Anderson would say—can imagine themselves.<sup>289</sup> This historiography stands in stark contrast to what most Americans idealistically tell themselves about public schooling. In this way, Sage paints a picture of unschooling's subculture/mainstream socio-cultural tensions, as manifested in oppositional media forms.



Sage at her Sweet Candy Distro table at the Southeastern Swag Market (courtesy Sage Adderley)

I see Sage's delving into DIY culture as a sort of rebirth: "I just became obsessed with independent media and Do-It-Yourself, printing my zine myself. I want total hands-on control of everything. Now it's pretty amazing. I want to make everything and create everything." Becoming an unschooler and DIY media producer-consumer plays a part in the transformation of Sage's identity. New ways of making, consuming and producing media reposition her identity geographically—shifting her horizon line. Sage explained that she grew up in a small town in rural Georgia. In 2005, Sage and her husband moved the family to Philadelphia, and Sage describes this as a deliverance from a sort of cultural

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<sup>289</sup> Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* focuses on the mechanisms through which people come under the thrall of nationalism. At the intersection of DIY and unschooling subcultures, people imagine themselves as resistant to the nation state. The compelling stories of the patriotic nation and Gatto's *Underground History* lead each side to label the other as conspiracy theory.

backwater, void of substance, individuality, rife with mass media and mainstream consumer culture.

They didn't want to bring their children up in the same "closed-minded area" they'd experienced as kids. The space of public schools didn't offer much flexibility and presented Sage with troubling socio-cultural issues: "There are things girls are dealing with these days... weight issues and things like having confidence in yourself. They're saying that elementary school girls are dealing with anorexia and that blows me away. I get to be with my girls and help them feel strong. Now that I'm getting into DIY, I'm learning all over again in my life. I just started sewing my own washable menstrual pads.<sup>290</sup> I'm learning about things I can do. Why be ashamed—there's such a big thing about periods! I can pass on the 'no shame' thing to my girls. A woman can be powerful and be at home. I've talked to some radicals who thought that being at home was not being powerful, that it wasn't being a feminist. I do. My daughter is making zines! How cool is that!?" As a feminist, work-at-home mom, Sage engages with the practice of defining what it means to be a feminist and a mother raising her children in present day America.<sup>291</sup> As unschooling mom, artist-activist Heather puts it, "You don't have to be

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<sup>290</sup> One can see how this DIY practice takes on ritualistic weight. This is in itself a very rich event, and unfortunately I only have the space to analyze it in this footnote. What does it mean when Sage makes her own washable menstrual pads? First of all, she's defiantly rejecting the oppressive socio-cultural norms that teach women to be ashamed of their bodies. Secondly, she rejects consumer culture, which markets disposable sanitary products to women. Such familiar consumerism masks the harm sanitary products might be inflicting on women (the cotton in tampons is bleached white to give them that "clean" look, meanwhile the cumulative effect of the bleach may harm the body). Disposable waste also contributes to the landfills, and so Sage acts in opposition to environmental damage. Thirdly, Sage shares in the practice of DIY and Third Wave feminist crafting movements.

<sup>291</sup> In her 2001 CMS thesis, Cynthia Conti describes Le Tigre's music as "typical of Third Wave feminism: contradiction...[I]t is easy to see why Third Wavers do not have a sense of one feminist identity. Whereas many Second Wavers would have seen this as a vulnerability of the movement, it is an irrefutable strength of the Third Wave. As Garrison explains, by choosing not to be defined, feminists make their movement all-inclusive, allowing a wide diversity of people to work towards dismantling the form of patriarchy that is familiar to them." Conti refers to what Garrison termed "tactical subjectivity" (p.24, Conti, *Stepping up to the Mic: Le Tigre Strategizes Third Wave Feminism through Music and Performance*). We can see this "tactical subjectivity" at work in unschooling. The only rule of unschooling is to be inclusive. Interestingly, we see the desire for political action to be re-conceptualized to the point where it's integrated into the everyday practice of living. No longer must feminists only stage protests, just as no longer must education reformers work for change within the System. Rather, the strength of these grassroots movements

Donna Reed to be a stay-at-home-mom.”<sup>292</sup> Through unschooling and their involvement in DIY media and crafts, Sage and her family not only learn in a less “close-minded” way, but also they moved to another part of the country that better reflects their socio-political allegiances. And while many zinesters aren’t able to move physically, the “Scene may not be a place, but it is a community.”<sup>293</sup>

I asked Sage how the practice of making, consuming and distributing zines plays a role in homeschooling. She told me she sees “everything in a new light now that I’m homeschooling and I think we’re incorporating zines into our homeschooling. Emily just wrote a zine about birds and it’s all about all the creative crafts she’s done. Her



*DIY Fabric Nest How-to in Emily's Zine. (courtesy Sage & Emily Adderley)*

homeschooling group made an edible bird feeder at their last group meeting. So we put a DIY tutorial in it for the other kids. And she made a recommended reading list. I think we’re incorporating what she’s learning. And she’s learning to

express herself through the zines.” As I discussed in the previous case studies, unschoolers seek out information that interests them, not according to an outside curriculum. Unschoolers then compile what they learn, in the case of zines, into homemade compendiums of information and share these with friends. Learning is self-motivated and largely through informal practices. As Sage noted, Emily makes zines

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comes from within the individuals “taking back their lives” as Sage puts it. Thus the Do-It-Yourself sensibility perfectly serves such grassroots liberal movements, through media expressions of political messages and identities, but also by reinforcing the very mechanisms through which people produce, consume, and distribute these expressions.

<sup>292</sup> From a December 6, 2005 phone interview with Heather Cushman-Dowdee.

<sup>293</sup> p.60, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

“when she wants to. It’s not that I push it on her. You know, but she sees me pack zines everyday, so she’s really familiar with zines.”

Unschoolers approach distribution in a grassroots way, building on relationships and unschooling networks and what Gee has termed *affinity groups*.<sup>294</sup> While adults are involved and support the practice of making zine, kids also get feedback from a range of ages. “I just started an all-ages zine page on my distro [website]. I think it’s so great that kids can communicate with each other through zines. When Emily writes a zine, she says, this is what I want my friends to know. That’s the audience: her readers, her friends. I think zines are going to end up playing a big part in our homeschooling. [The all-ages zine page on Sweet Candy Distro has] inspired other families. There’s a family in Oregon who does one with poems, pictures, vegan recipes. Kids can express themselves how they want to, not how someone tells them to.” The affinity group then offers feedback, but does not dictate a standardized procedure, thus leaving room for innovation and unique expressions. As Duncombe says, “[w]hat makes their identity authentic is that they are the ones defining it.”<sup>295</sup>

These DIY practices of producing, consuming, and distributing media support a sense of subcultural identity as well as informing an experiential learning-by-doing. Emily comes to learn not only the hands-on skills of making zines, taking them to the post office, etc, but she also learns the value of “expressing herself” and being part of a community of young zinesters.

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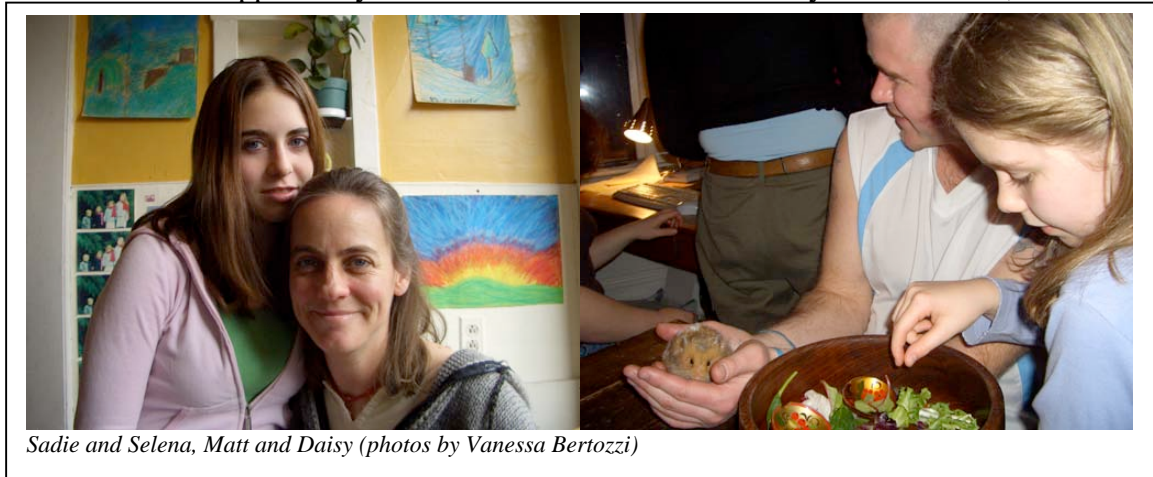
<sup>294</sup> See James Paul Gee’s *What Videogames have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*. Gee writes about the MMPORG *Everquest* as an affinity group (p.171). It’s useful to apply this type of thinking to DIY practices of making zines. The social practice of making zines both happens in real life space and through the extended subculture.

<sup>295</sup> p.39, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

## **Background: Matt, Selena, Sadie, Daisy and The Purple Thistle kids**

My interest in unschoolers' DIY media prompted me to follow up with a contact I'd made early on in my research. I first met Matt Hern at the August 2005 *Learning in Our Own Way Conference* organized by Pat Farenga, who now runs Holt Associates. Matt's great mix of curse words and enthusiastic intelligence make him come across as a person who stands by his beliefs. With a shaved head and standing over six-feet-tall, wearing jeans and t-shirts with cut-off sleeves, Matt also seems like someone with whom you'd have fascinating philosophical conversations on the neighborhood basketball court.

I had the opportunity to do fieldwork with Matt's family in Vancouver, Canada.



*Sadie and Selena, Matt and Daisy (photos by Vanessa Bertozzi)*

Matt is well known as an unschooling author (*Deschooling Our Lives*) and activist in the subculture.<sup>296</sup> Matt and his partner Selena have two girls, Sadie who is 14 and Daisy who is 8. Selena, a grounded and warm person, shares her dark brown eyes with Sadie, whose strong shoulders reflect her interest in the trapeze and circus acrobatics. Daisy, who has straight blonde hair and a sweet heart-shaped face, looks like the spitting image of Matt and talks in the same rapid-fire manner. Both girls do a mix of unschooling and

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<sup>296</sup> *Deschooling Our Lives* is a collection of unschooling works by various authors including Hern, Guterson, Llewellyn, Falbel, and many more unschoolers. The introduction is by Ivan Illich.

democratically run Free School, Windsor House founded in 1970s, where Selena works.<sup>297</sup>

In 2001, Matt and seven teens started The Purple Thistle, a youth community arts center housed in a former warehouse down by the train tracks in East Vancouver.<sup>298</sup> The Purple Thistle serves unschooling teens—street punks who “mostly have no families” as Matt puts it. One of The Thistle kids I interviewed, Ashley, noted that Matt would object to being called “the boss.” The Purple Thistle functions as a social-anarchist collective with a group of kids having as much a stake in its daily operations as Matt, except that he does all the fundraising for the nonprofit.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> That is, until recently when Sadie decided to go to public high school. When Matt first brought me to their house in Vancouver, he warned me that I’d be staying in Sadie’s room. His delivery gave me the impression that she’s a bit fierce. “Yeah, she’s kinda anal.” He talked with me about Sadie’s decision to go to school this year. He doesn’t understand and said they spent a lot of time debating it. However, he said he’s supporting her in her decision and she’s sticking to it. When Sadie arrived at the house later, she walked straight up to me and announced “You’re sleeping in my room.” She then went up to her father and said, “Matt, I’m getting straight As.” Matt half-heartedly said, “That’s good.” With kids rebelling by getting straight As, the intergenerational tensions in unschooling families come full circle. Conflicts in reproducing the unschooling subculture arise in part because of the practice of freedom. Sadie took responsibility for her own decision, and Matt let her know he considered it a flawed choice. But he couldn’t disallow his child the freedom to reject freedom. In fact, it wasn’t his place to allow or disallow another’s free will. Jason Marsh, in his documentary *Unschooling*, films a moment with Lexie explaining how she’s taking a test “because [she] happen[s] to like taking tests.” Her mother responds, “If she really wants take the stupid test, then she should take the stupid test!” while Lexie chimes in, “It’s not stupid!”

<sup>298</sup> Matt took me on a walk through “East Van.” He knows everything about and truly loves this diverse, working class neighborhood. He spoke in that great, informal urban planning way about the history of his neighborhood, pausing to say “Hey, buddy!” to neighbors walking along Commercial Drive. East Vancouver has the most bustling community center I’ve ever seen: Britannia. The word that came to my mind was literally “smurfy.” We walked past yoga places, Indian markets, coffee shops, down past a park where The Thistle kids were doing their DIY Chopper Bike jousting. We continued on down to the no-man’s-land, industrial area where The Thistle takes up shop in an old warehouse. I was struck by how fitting this is. A lot of these kids are transient and it made sense to be in this neighborhood, which had a history of squatters down by the train tracks. Part of the squatters’ area, Matt told me, was made into a dump. And then in the late 60s, it was converted into a community garden. The tradition of reuse came from within the context of the neighborhood. The neighborhood, in short, is a mix of immigrant, working class, and hippy gentrification. There are some areas of East Van that suffer from violence and drug abuse.

<sup>299</sup> Stephen Duncombe offers this explanation of the connection between anarchy and zines: “On the most basic level, anarchism is the philosophy of individual dissent within the context of volunteer communities, and zines are the products of individual dissenters who have set up volunteer networks of communication with one another. But the connections run even deeper: the underground ideal of authenticity is part of the tradition of anarchism as well” (p.35). For more on the traditions of anarchism and the founder of anarchism Godwin’s ideas about aesthetics and action, see Duncombe’s *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

Ashley, who currently lives in Matt and Selena’s extra bedroom, told me that The Purple Thistle has the largest zine library in the country. As she showed me the calendar and zines she’d worked on at The Thistle, Ashley explained that it’s a creative outlet for kids: “We can do what we want.” For instance, one of the zines I looked at while visiting The Thistle was titled “High School is a Factory” and included original articles, cartoons and photos.<sup>300</sup> In this way, the family’s house, The Purple Thistle, and the surrounding



The Purple Thistle is in a former-warehouse in East Vancouver. The zine library at The Purple Thistle. (photos by Vanessa Bertozzi)

neighborhood in East Vancouver constitute an integrated and intentional place—a place where community is the highest priority. The practice of making, consuming and distributing DIY media is highly situated in this place.

When I first arrived at Matt and Selena’s home, the first thing that struck me was the comfortable wood furniture, Sadie’s trapeze in the living room<sup>301</sup> and the posters from the Bread and Puppet Theater, an experimental, progressive theater collective founded in 1962.<sup>302</sup> I associate Bread and Puppets with the 1960s and 70s critique of the

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<sup>300</sup> Most of the zines are black and white. The articles appeared to be typed on a typewriter. Whether this is so or if the zines are made with courier font on a computer, I don’t know. Suffice it to say that the DIY aesthetic is pre-digital.

<sup>301</sup> Sadie does a circus arts program for kids, called *CirKids*, a sort of training camp for *Cirque du Soleil* (<http://www.cirkids.org/>).

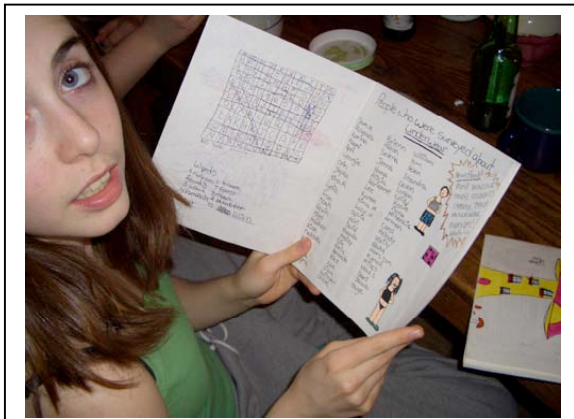
<sup>302</sup> Bread and Puppet Theater has a very real connection with the unschooling community. Eminent unschoolers of the 60s and 70s, George Dennison and John Holt were friends with Peter Schumann, the founder of the theater. Now centered near Burlington, VT, the theater is also loosely connected with Goddard College, an alternative college in the area that holds many of the same values as unschooling. Bread and Puppets held an annual, outdoor theater festival in Vermont until 1998, a sort of countercultural event founded on principles of folk art, progressive politics and



*technocratic society*. It follows that unschoolers who feel misgivings about technology—and the consumer culture content that it so often delivers—wouldn't have a television and would instead take up DIY practices. Such was the case with Matt and his family.

## Real life Community

While chatting in the kitchen the night I arrived, Selena had been curious about what kind of media I studied at MIT. “So what do you mean by media? Digital media?”



Sadie with a Kelly News zine. (photo by Vanessa Bertozzi)

I'd responded that I was interested in all sorts of media and remarked on their Bread and Puppet Theater posters.<sup>303</sup> Selena smiled and said she'd be right back. She returned with piles of zines that Daisy and Sadie had made at their Free School. Selena remarked that many

of the kids she'd known through the years had learned to read and write through making these zines.<sup>304</sup> Much of the entertainment for the rest of the night entailed everyone

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community. Bread and Puppets now travels the country, stopping in towns and collaborating with locals to make huge paper-maché puppets and perform a cultural critique of mainstream consumer culture and rightwing politics. When I saw Bread and Puppets in Cambridge, I noted the skit in which computer puppets did a dance of the willies and degenerated into chaotic collapse. I'm kicking myself for not buying a poster they sold at the show: it had an image of lilies done in woodblock and read “RESIST the worthlessness of machine-operated details of life!” These representations of the limitations and failures of technology crystallized for me the strain of unschoolers who doubt technology and digital media because of their potential to dehumanize (<http://www.breadandpuppet.org/>).

<sup>303</sup> I actually made the Freudian slip/faux pas of calling it Bread and Circus, the former name of Whole Foods, the organic and notoriously pricey grocery store. But Selena didn't seem to mind. Another striking image hanging in the family's home was the commemorative poster of a midwifery task force's quilt. The theme of the quilt was homebirth and each piece of the quilt had a different beautiful and graphic image representing birth and pregnancy. Quilting is another great example of a DIY media practice.

<sup>304</sup> In the *Introduction to Five Unschooling Case Studies*, I address the common but misguided attempts to ask unschoolers “Is it educational, what you're doing?” A friend of Selena's and Matt's who'd worked at Windsor House helped with the “teen trips,” month long road trips with a bunch of teens and a few adults. He told me about planning



taking turns reading from the zines and laughing and reminiscing. Daisy was eager to read aloud to me from the zines she works on, called *Animalias*, a series in which each zine focuses on a different animal. The *Snakes Animalias* had a Medusa theme, for example. Daisy told me she really enjoyed writing the “interview” with Winnie the Pooh for the *Bear Animalias*. Sadie picked another one from the pile and laughter broke out. I asked for the story behind that zine, from a series called *Kelly News*. Selena and the girls explained that it was the result of one field trip gone awry. A few years ago, Selena and another teacher from the Free School had wanted to take the kids on a mountain hike to a really beautiful spot where they would sit and meditate and write material for a zine.<sup>305</sup> It turned out that it had poured rain that day, but they’d gone anyway. The cold miserableness of the day is well documented in the zine by the kids who wrote evocative poetry and first-person accounts of trudging through the rain. Selena was crying she was laughing so hard—she was incredibly tickled by her own failed attempts to do something so hippy. The impromptu zine reading segued into a meal with about ten guests. One of The Purple Thistle kids, Leni, spearheaded the cooking of homemade vegetarian Indian food.<sup>306</sup>

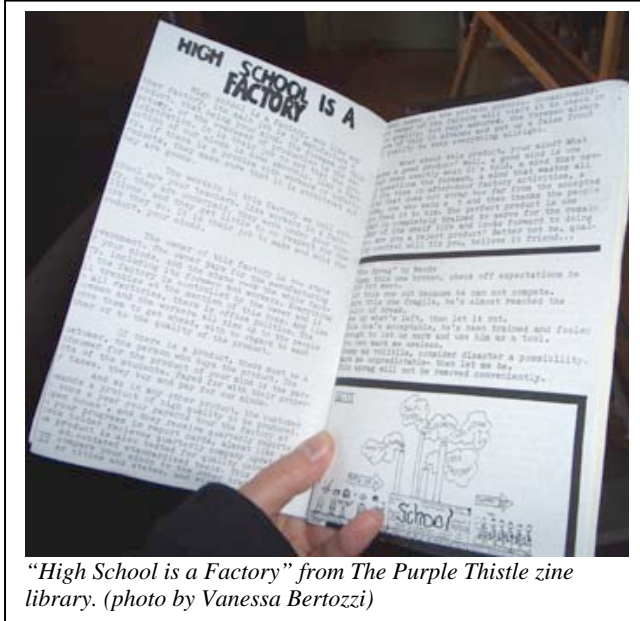
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the trip, the kids getting out the maps and deciding where and how they wanted to go. I posed the question to him, “So, do you guys try to make this educational? In your heads, are you secretly thinking, ah yes, the kids are learning how to use maps?” “No, it’s just ‘a great thing.’” Labeling something as “educational” seems to be antithetical to the practice of learning-by-doing—or maybe only when you’re asked such a loaded question by a researcher. Moments later, Selena showed me the zines and offered that this was the way many children had learned to read and write. After recent elections, the government in BC has become more conservative, and made changes in the bureaucratic management of Free Schools, which receive some public funds in Canada. Selena is required to do much more paperwork in which she documents, however qualitatively, what skills children at Windsor House Free School are learning. The confusion over what unschoolers consider “educational” is an ingrained—if not intentional—way of resisting the oppression of quantitative and results-oriented power structures. It reminds me of Herbert Kohl’s and Paolo Freire’s ideas about minority groups’ resistance through “silence.”

<sup>305</sup> Meditation strikes me as a learning practice, a highly personal and unquantifiable sort of thinking, that the institution of school does not promote.

<sup>306</sup> Here I would note the emphasis on the communal domestic space. Third Wave feminism in this case takes the form of not just the mother, or the women, but *everyone in the group*. Domestic roles in this household were not defined along gender roles, or age roles. Everyone did the laundry.

While it could be said that the above descriptions focus on the medium of zines, I think it would be better put as the *socio-cultural practices of making, consuming, and distributing zines*. Unschoolers and DIY practices are a perfect match, partners in their mutual opposition to hierarchy. When making something with their own hands, unschoolers engage in an activity in which it's their experience that counts. The proof is



in the making, rather than an authority's standard.

Matt, his family, and The Thistle kids make zines in usually collaborative efforts. Matt underscored the importance of this when I asked what other types of media kids make at The Purple Thistle: "It doesn't really matter to

me whether the kids are making videos or zines or whether they go on to be professional photographers, just so long as they're getting together and working things out together."<sup>307</sup> The way people consume zines, as demonstrated by the family and friends' impromptu "zine reading" reflects this culture of producer-consumers. Matt, his family and many of The Purple Thistle kids hold their real life community, their face-to-face relationships as the priority of their unschooling in a social-anarchist practice.

<sup>307</sup> Again, Matt's words here represent a resistance to outsiders asking the wrong questions. As he drove me to the airport (in his communally shared car), Matt pointed this out to me, saying that such questions beg a quantitative response. He would rather just ask himself and the kids, "Are you guys gonna be ok?" And, for him, this question can only be answered "on a local level." It's all about the relationships he has with the kids and the kids with each other. And so I asked, "Are the kids gonna be ok?" He laughed and said, "The kids fuck up all the time, you know?" Matt had told me earlier that The Purple Thistle is a pretty cool place, except for the scabies you can get from the couches. And he'd seen some horrible STDs come through The Thistle. It's a pretty tough crowd of kids and Matt does his best, at a local level.

Sage and Emily have virtual pen pals and zinester friends whom they've never met face-to-face. They also see their participation in DIY practices as necessarily social. They conceptualize their relationships with others in the extended network as being part of the "virtual community" of unschoolers and zinesters. Sage doesn't feel that technology such as the Internet takes her away from community, but rather connects her to a political consciousness through mediated relationships with other individuals, however physically distant they may be. Her sense of belonging hinges on her identification with the practice of DIY and unschooling on a meta-socio-cultural level.

Part of Sage's strong emotional, political, and intellectual identification with DIY culture and unschooling comes from the potency of the media itself. People consciously make zines as anti-formalizing media objects. People use this medium to break down barriers—between people, between professionalized and homemade notions of publishing standards. I consider the DIY practice of making media not only working through the process of participatory practice, but also serving to reproduce the culture of the collective. Unschooling parents Beatrice and Randy explain:

*Beatrice: "Unschooling is do it yourself. And it is very grassroots in that it starts from the basic unit- the home."*

*Randy: "The accessibility of editing software, especially for radio (since video is a little too demanding for our budget, currently) has meant a lot to our pursuit of weekly radio programming; I think zine publishing or web-based production is valuable to developing media literacy and comfort level with local production, local control; this all gives some degree of power to the producer, which is a form of freedom."*<sup>308</sup>

For unschoolers who produce DIY media, the subcultural practices inform and enrich the subcultural identity.

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<sup>308</sup> From an interview with Beatrice and Randy who run a community radio show about unschooling in Canada. The interview was conducted through email, March 20, 2006.

Zines are anti-commercial. The practice of DIY connects with unschoolers' sentiments of anti-authoritarianism, and anti-mass-production/manufacturing. The "zine community is busy creating a culture whose value isn't calculated as profit or loss on ruled ledger pages, but is assembled in the margins, using criteria like control, connection, and authenticity."<sup>309</sup> Anti-consumerist and anti-corporate sentiments make people choose not to buy, but rather to empower themselves through making. In other words, you don't have to be a certified professional in something to be able to learn how to Do-It-Yourself. Sometimes, Matt says, unschoolers reflect on the meaning of this practice through "talking about zines as counter-institutional ... both explicitly and implicitly. [O]vertly for the more involved, radical, political kids. [M]any kids just pick it up because they can though, because other punks do it, because we run a zine program... just because. [T]hey may well reflect on the role the mass media plays in shaping culture and their part in resisting that, but ... for most it is assumed in the cultural milieu."<sup>310</sup> DIY constitutes a philosophy, which is inherently political and oppositional to mainstream culture and consumption, but also highly integrated in the everyday practice of the subculture. As Ashley stressed, zines are a way for kids to have control over the means of production. These DIY practices constitute a form of political and economic critique through action, linking the unschooling subculture back to its 1960s–70s roots as a radical utopian vision. Today, the seamless integration of the message into the medium is results in anxiety internal in the subculture: who's a *real* punk vs. who's only doing this to *look cool*.

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<sup>309</sup> p.2, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

<sup>310</sup> From an email with Matt Hern, April 17 2006.

When I asked Ashley and Matt what happens after the kids make the zines, calendars, and magazines, do they sell them? Matt responded by saying that this “isn’t really part of the whole zine culture.” It’s about sharing and circulating those media objects in a participatory way. The same goes for much of the media in the unschooling subculture: it’s given away for free and distributed through grassroots means. For example, Kim and Ken and their family make the



*Homeschool Habitat*, a monthly podcast about homeschooling.<sup>311</sup> Beatrice and Randy, also along with their kids, do *Radio Free School*, a community radio show about homeschooling.<sup>312</sup> Los Angeles-based Third Wave feminist artist, Heather web-distributes her comic called *Hathor the Cowgoddess*. The comic follows the adventures of her cow-like avatar who unschools her children and whose “breasts are her superpower and her sidekick is her baby, always carried in a sling and prominently (politically) suckling at her exposed breast.”<sup>313</sup> While Heather attributes this sort of creativity to an unschooling mindset (all the unschooling artists she knows “went about things like they were playing”), a lot of this work is so creative because it’s unfettered by the constraints of commercial sphere or mainstream tastes.<sup>314</sup>

<sup>311</sup> *Homeschool Habitat* is available for free through iTunes or any podcasting software. <http://bradley.chicago.il.us/hh/>.

<sup>312</sup> *Radio Free School*. <http://www.hwcn.org/~ap951/station.html>.

<sup>313</sup> Heather takes part in political protests for peace, sustainable environment and free trade. She wears a huge, paper maché puppet head of Hathor the Cowgoddess. She was very inspired by the Bread and Puppet Theater as well as Joseph Campbell and mythology. Hathor was also inspired by Heather’s experiences in La Leche League. Many of my unschooling informants mentioned La Leche League, a support group for nursing moms and Heather described it as a “hotbed of radical feminism...and it’s underground” (<http://www.lalecheleague.org/> and <http://thecowgoddess.com>).

<sup>314</sup> Phone interview with Heather, December 6, 2005.

Unschoolers don't generally frown upon small, family-owned businesses. But some DIY punks look down upon selling your wares rather than being part of a collective. It just smacks of capitalism and consumerism.<sup>315</sup>

Some unschoolers do make a little bit of money from selling their DIY media. Sage runs her own small zine distribution business out of her home and belongs to a feminist-vegan-crafting-zine-collective called CROQ.<sup>316</sup> Another example, Lizette, an unschooling mom, makes hand-



One of Heather's comics that she distributes via the web. (courtesy Heather Cushman-Dowdee)

sewn clothing and objects inspired by her kids' drawings. She sells them on Etsy.com, "an online marketplace for buying and selling all things handmade," according to Etsy.com's mission statement.<sup>317</sup> SouleMama blogs about unschooling and sells her handmade baby clothing online.<sup>318</sup> One can see DIY media as the political mirror image

<sup>315</sup> One wonders how you're supposed to earn money. This is exactly the double bind many street punks find themselves in. I spoke with a friend in Portland who bemoaned the intensity of DIY punk culture, in which pretty much any employment constitutes selling out and working for The Man.

<sup>316</sup> From the CROQ community profile on LiveJournal: "In this world of blogs, craft books and boutiques agog, we're not trying to show you what's new and hip. This zine came about due to a mutual frustration in regards to the current craft resurgence. Why isn't anyone writing about the importance of what we're doing? Why isn't there a craft zine written by people who make stuff? And most importantly, we wanted to see a real print and paper zine that we would actually read. With strong online as well as real-life networks, we are entering a new era never before seen. By combining the power of the Internet with the power of personal creativity, we are proving that things do not have to be mass-produced, that we can be our own stylists, that there is strength in mastering the sewing machine or the knitting needles or the silkscreen. We're about not only recognizing the past legacy and the future possibilities of craft, but about reminding you, the reader, that you're not alone. Some say that the bubble has already burst, that craft has reached its apex and is destined to plummet. We say bring it on" (<http://community.livejournal.com/croqzine/profile>).

<sup>317</sup> <http://www.lizettegreco.com/> and [http://www.etsy.com/shop.php?user\\_id=5418](http://www.etsy.com/shop.php?user_id=5418)

<sup>318</sup> One can't help but see the Martha Stewart influence (<http://soulemama.typepad.com/>).

of what unschoolers consider mainstream mass media and consumer society to be. Subsequently, the economic model could be viewed as somewhat inhibited. It's a way of being stingy with your money but not your time.<sup>319</sup> On the other hand, DIY unschoolers attempt to self-fashion small-scale economic models that work for them. Many unschoolers work in and support the world of not-for-profits. Matt spends a lot of his time writing grant applications. This summer, The Purple Thistle will be offering a program about "getting a job you love and keeping it" for young, lesbian unschoolers. They "decided to run the summer program because we could get the funding, because more people need jobs, because it will support the thistle's infrastructure." The impetus is not competition, but rather greater good for the group. The same can be said for the open-source movement. Certainly, notions of identity, reputation, and status present their own challenges and generative mechanisms within these non-commercial collectives. A comparative study of these grassroots, underground, DIY and open-source media should consider their alternative economic mechanisms in relation to the larger economy.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>319</sup> Stephen Duncombe has a whole chapter on "Work" in his book *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, in which he discusses the complicated economic relationships zinesters have to their work places and consumer society in general. Some zinesters rationalize pilfering office supplies from one's workplace as subversive, for instance. Not exactly like the Luddites "who destroyed textile machinery in England in the early nineteenth century, zine saboteurs aren't hoping to restore a recent tradition of nonalienated or 'authentic' labor—at least not within the workplace. While the ideal of nonalienated work is carried over into the cultural realm...it's all but given up for lost at the nine-to-five job. Instead, sabotage is about psychic rather than material victories"(p.81). We could see this as a precedent of the so-called Napster generation which pirates mp3s for remixing, a practice not unlike making zines through appropriation of physical and intellectual properties.

<sup>320</sup> Not unlike the anti-consumerist model of zine collective distribution, the hacker and open-source movement also spurns commercial interests in favor of the greater good. But despite this similarity in practice, the two genres of DIY—one distinguished as intentionally lo-fi and the other distinctively high-tech geeky—often think the other silly or misguided. I would count SCA and historical reenacting as incorporating the practice of DIY as well, but the attitude is less "fuck the man." These genres have internal hierarchies, policing who's got the most "accurate" look. It's a look that is very much self-styled. In the case of reenacting and the SCA, researching and fabricating as exact a replication as possible gains respect. With punks, the more outrageously individually self-styled one looks the better. Both reenactors and DIY punks consider buying used clothing cool because it's cheap and also signifies ingenuity. Even better is sewing from scratch, knitting and crocheting. Silk-screening, patching, studding, modifying clothing in the punk scene give the clothing the frayed, distressed and above all, anti-consumerist look. Both genres express notions of subcultural identity through these DIY practices.

The economic model, modes of production, consumption and distribution, as well as identity and aesthetics all inform and support each other. In the world of DIY unschooling media, it's not just about the appearance; it's about the experience of making things. In effect, unschoolers accrue knowledge through self-fashioning. This DIY practice of media-making meshes with the larger unschooling philosophy and everyday, experiential learning. This innovative self-fashioning gives rise to mediated expressions.

## Conclusion



Thus DIY practices in the unschooling community not only accretes an experiential knowledge full of little epiphanies, it also consists of un-alienated labor. The product of this labor, the DIY object, expresses a signal

of belonging to a subculture of subversive politics. DIY is a collective reclaiming of the means of production, and it is inherently anti-authoritarian. As Benjamin wrote about film, photography, and by extension, the Xerox machine, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art.”<sup>321</sup> Although zines are made with machines, they are also cut-up, taped-together hybrid forms that restore the aura of the art object. This time, the DIY object gives off an aura of the labor and identity of the unique individual who self-fashioned it. Punks make the art, rather than great masters.

<sup>321</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in *Illuminations*.



Now that we're in the age of digital reproduction, zinesters revel in the DIY aura of the age of mechanical reproduction. Anxieties about authenticity have been displaced—or rather bumped ahead one notch—in the skirmishes that surround technological innovations.

The pride that comes from making a DIY object is more than a sense of accomplishment. It's also rite of passage into a subculture. In 2006, it's another form of “dropping out, tuning in,” and necessarily tuning into a community of producer-consumers, replete with its own subcultural history tracing back to the 60s and 70s.<sup>322</sup> The identity and practices of this subculture, then, intertwine with the larger socio-cultural history of the United States since the Industrial Revolution.

The particular tensions of local vs. imagined virtual community play out in DIY. Unschoolers' relationships to each other move through and cluster around these media forms. Philosophical notions of authenticity result in differing practices: one that prioritizes the local and one that prioritizes the larger subcultural, dispersed community. This touches the practice of making zines too. “The tension in the punk scene between the individual and community, between freedom and rules, is a microcosm of the tension that exists within all of the networked communities of the zine scene. Zines are profoundly personal expressions, yet as a medium of participatory communication they depend on and help create community. The contradiction is never resolved.”<sup>323</sup> The same can be said of unschooling in general.

Combining the grassroots forces of Third Wave feminism, anti-consumerism, local community, and unschooling make for a potent mix. The means of production and

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<sup>322</sup> Timothy Leary, *Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out*.

<sup>323</sup> p.65, Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

distribution not only serve as means to an end: the very nature of the DIY practice is infused with the politics of identity.<sup>324</sup> As Vernon Dewey, an unschooler I found through Friendster, wrote to me: “I think talking about the plethora of zines that discuss unschooling is an important point to make. ...The fact that unschooling IS DIY... it makes sense ... DIY media involves DIRECT interaction as opposed to passively accepting filtered information.”<sup>325</sup> DIY has evolved through a reciprocal relationship between generative experiential learning and empowering subcultural modes of expression.

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<sup>324</sup> DIY spreads across various subcultural and minority groups, engaged in self-fashioning. One great example is my sister-in-law Kim who blogs about being a type-1 diabetic parent. Kim posts DIY how-to's on crafting and modifying clothing to fit insulin pumps. It's a DIY form of life-hacking that plays with notions of science-fiction and the body. As Kim said in a March 19, 2006 email to me, “I think crafting is so empowering, scientific, satisfying” (<http://homepage.mac.com/kimchaloner/NYCIDDMDIY.html> and <http://siwgrstorm.blogspot.com/2006/04/customized-pump-cases.html>).

<sup>325</sup> Email from Vernon Dewey, March 10, 2006.

## **My Methodology: Unschooling the Thesis**

### **Introduction**

This *Methodology* chapter helps my reader understand the process I went through to write the *Five Unschooling Case Studies*. Methodological tools became relevant to my research and informed my work throughout. In a way, the process of researching and writing this thesis mimics the practices I've observed in unschooling. As in Case Study #1, I pursued *access to tools and resources*. Through a practice similar to Case Study #2, I tried to *embody knowledge and knowing*: absorbing the academic theory I was reading and then applying it to real life situations, only to reassess it in dialogue with my informants. The methods of Case Study #3 truly came in handy in my own research: *access to people through networks*. Case Study #4 examines the *relationship between my informants and myself, the researcher*. Here, I further analyze the affordances of the interview as a methodological tool. In Case Study #5, I investigate how unschoolers' participatory practices *co-construct media*. I also think of this thesis as a collaboration to a certain extent. Part of my methodology was to share and edit my writing with my informants, as well as to include their stories and images. I will further explore these methodological aspects in this chapter.

### **Structure**

With Catalina Laserna's help, I used a cross-case analysis matrix with a range of units of analysis. Through this matrix I was able to draw forth certain practices in each case study, but could also marshal supporting material from interviews with other families. The matrix helped to organize theoretical points for the case studies. This was a

useful organization tool, given that I'd done interviews and some fieldwork with forty-six informants. I had to choose only five main events out of the countless interesting stories and interactions I'd had throughout my research.

I use different units of analysis for each case study. While each case could be framed in a number of ways, I chose to use units of analysis that I felt revealed particular highlights of each case. Taken as a whole, these *Five Unschooling Case Studies* paint a more complete picture of this subculture. The units of analysis are:

Case 1: parent/child dyad within the family

[Peter's Opera Record: *Haphazardly Accessing the Cabinet of Curiosity*]

Case 2: social group of collaborating families

[Eli's Coop: *A Civil War Role-play*]

Case 3: extended networks of unschoolers

[Carsie's Network: *Connecting a Geographically Dispersed Population*]

Case 4: the family and the researcher

[Sandra Unschools the Researcher: *Legitimizing IM & TV*]

Case 5: the subculture of unschooling vs. mainstream society

[DIY Subculture: *Zines & Collective Participation*]

In this way, I'm started focused in and gradually zoom out to other levels of social

organization. Laying out the organization of the material in this way also allowed me to

make sure I represented moms and dads, girls and boys, as well as an age range. While I

did do an interview with Derek, an African-American, and Roberto, a Latino, I don't feel

I was able to adequately address minorities' experiences in these five case studies.<sup>326</sup>

### **Access to Tools and Resources**

As a way of introducing myself to the subculture of unschooling, I tried to read from the "canon" of unschooling texts. These were authors and books, movies, and websites that were most commonly mentioned online and in the few academic works and

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<sup>326</sup> I wrote a paper on African American homeschooling, grassroots reform, and the Digital Divide for Andrea Taylor's Harvard Graduate School of Education class *New Media, Power, and Global Diversity*, fall 2005.

articles I could find about unschooling. Familiarizing myself with the canon of unschooling texts was useful in a number of ways. I used a “snowballing” methodology: unschooling media objects often reference other unschooling books and magazines. Grace Llewellyn even writes about this in the introduction to the revised edition of her book, *Teenage Liberation Handbook*: “I recommend dozens of books, as well as other resources. Some of the books are out of print, but still available in libraries or used book stores. I have put a great deal of energy and thought into the recommendations and I often hear from readers that my suggestions are very helpful. But please don’t feel that you *need* a book to start a project (like making a zine, or starting a book group, or studying the ants in your kitchen.”<sup>327</sup> The books are ambient within the subculture and unschoolers offer help in accessing them, yet always, with the caveat that these resources are optional.

I would like to stress the importance of other people in finding tools and resources. I relied heavily on the recommendations from the first people I interviewed, and only after a matter of time and exposure did I start to see patterns—the canon—emerge. For example, Grace Llewellyn’s *Teenage Liberation Handbook* and John Holt’s books became touchstones as I conducted interviews with my informants: I started to notice the recurrence of narratives of initiation rites-of-passage into unschooling. I started to think of these books as gateways to the paradigm-shift. I would follow suite—acting as any new unschooler would—and go to local independent bookstores or use Amazon.com. I read Llewellyn’s book and then looked up her recommended reading at the end of her volume. I returned to Amazon.com hoping to find the bushwhacked path of unschooling books: “Customers who bought this book also

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<sup>327</sup> p.34, Grace Llewellyn, *Teenage Liberation Handbook*. Her emphasis.

bought...”<sup>328</sup> I scoured unschooling blogs for “favorite books” lists. I searched movie databases for any documentaries on unschooling. In one case, I read in one of Holt’s books about a black and white, 16mm 1971 documentary by Peggy Hughes called “We Have to Call It School.” Through talking to Pat Farenga, I learned Susannah Sheffer and Aaron Falbel had the only extant copy, which they were kind enough to allow me to borrow and dub.

Whether through online software like Amazon or del.icio.us, or through talking with folks, I was able to experience the de-hierarchy of grassroots media in unschooling. I became aware that there was no official reading list, but rather favorites of like-minded folks. Through this immersion into the resources, both offline and online, I familiarized myself with the body of unschooling media. It was not the most efficient methodology, but rather, in keeping with the grassroots nature of the subculture.

This process revealed what Foucault referred to as “genealogy”; it enabled me to recognize practices and ideology when I encountered them in my fieldwork and interviews. Knowing the genealogy gave me the material for the *History/Historiography* chapter, but it also gave me “street cred” in the unschooling subculture. After a while, I was able to recommend books, movies, websites and other resources in my conversations with unschoolers. I sometimes emailed my bibliography to informants after interviews, in which we talked about such resources.

### **Embodiment of Practice**

As I became more and more familiar with unschooling, I felt that I was experiencing the paradigm-shift, which I write about in this thesis. While I don’t have

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<sup>328</sup> <http://www.Amazon.com>.

children and I'm not sure if I would unschool if I did have them, this action of consideration preoccupied me to a certain extent.

In terms of theory, *testing out ideas* was useful. I applied academic theories to see how well they would play along with my real life observations and conversations with unschoolers. In this way, I was improvising along a theme. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's social theory of *situated learning, legitimate peripheral participation*, was one such theory.

Lave and Wenger's writing appears to be informed by a philosophy of interconnectedness, which fits a holistic worldview. Lave and Wenger, in using a theory of social practice, "emphasize the relational interdependency of agent and world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing." "Learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world."<sup>329</sup> The way they formulate their argument consistently involves interdependence (such as newcomers to old-timers) and reciprocal relationships. The structure of their theory attempts to embody the very dialogic nature of learning according to their worldview. I've also attempted to participate in the practices that I theorize in this thesis.

While reading Lave and Wenger's work feels like reading theory, I find that the authors very much ground their work in the complexities of the "everyday." They in fact pay homage to the idea of practice, not just theory. My research is on a subculture of people who resist theory without practice. Unschoolers dislike so-called educational experts who deal in abstractions and don't really understand unschooling on the level of

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<sup>329</sup> Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger focus very much on the lived-in, RL world. Their case studies are midwifery, tailors, butchers, etc. My case studies extend the lived experiences to hybrids of real life and online lived experience. (p.51, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*).

lived experience. For instance, Llewellyn writes that “[l]ike many cumbersome terms that issue from schoolpeople’s jaws, ‘experiential education’ is an inflated, fancy term referring to a simple concept: learning by doing.”<sup>330</sup> For unschoolers, any outside attempt to dictate theory constitutes the sort of institutional oppression that they’re trying to avoid. While the theory of *legitimate peripheral participation* is from outside the community of unschooling practice, I felt I could use it as a guiding theory, kept in my mind while researching.

Often left unsaid is the fact that academics come from a community of practice in which someone such as myself—a graduate student researcher, a sort of apprentice—must learn standard ways of doing things. My role appears naturalized for others: she’s a researcher, and she’s come to impose her theory on us. Unschoolers have a kind of defensiveness against pure theory, which reflexively binds my identity to the perceived oppressive structure of academia. And while I consciously use anthropological research methods in an attempt to ground my theories in the unschoolers’ everyday, the very process of my materializing my observations through the act of recording and then writing has encountered some resistance and suspicion. It doesn’t help that I attended Harvard and MIT, very schoolish, elite schools.<sup>331</sup> Because I’m from MIT, assumptions about my techno-enthusiasm—which were not entirely untrue—made for some fraught interactions with unschoolers who regarded technology with suspicion. In the end, these initial labels were complicated and contextualized, as Matt Hern says, “on the local level”—for the unschoolers and for myself as well.

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<sup>330</sup> p.57, Grace Llewellyn, *Teenage Liberation Handbook*.

<sup>331</sup> Again, the difference between the schools’ philosophies feels real to me, but people who doubt the necessity of expensive systems of education, don’t see much of a difference.



And so the power dynamic here circles back in interesting ways. As a researcher, I come from “outside” rather than from the practice of unschooling. The first question I hear when meeting an unschooler is: “Were you unschooled?” This, on the one hand, can be viewed as an orienting device: How much do we have to explain to Vanessa or does she already “get it”? Since unschooling involves a paradigm-shift in the ways in which you perceive the world around you, a number of my informants have told me that they assume I just couldn't really comprehend what they're doing. So on the one hand, this unschoolers' defensive distancing technique frustrated me. At the same time, I need that distance—that “otherness”—to be able to recognize what is instinctual for unschoolers. These inter-social dimensions of researching impact my writing in such a real and vivid way, mostly as a safeguard against imposing graduate student jargon and “theory without praxis.”

### **Access to People**

I tapped into the grassroots networks of unschoolers, in effect researching modes of communication while using them. The interplay of these modes of networking shows through as the underlying structure of my research. As I weave my conversations with and observations of unschoolers into this thesis, I reference those grassroots networks and their contingent modalities, which in fact brought me to my informants and sometimes, them to me.

These networks were sometimes online and were sometimes offline. Early on in my research, I attended an unschooling conference in August 2005, the *Learning in Our Own Way* conference, organized by Pat Farenga. Attending this conference turned out to

be particularly helpful: I realized that not all unschoolers were as enthusiastic about the Internet as I'd assumed, coming as I did from MIT and being fully enamored of the web.

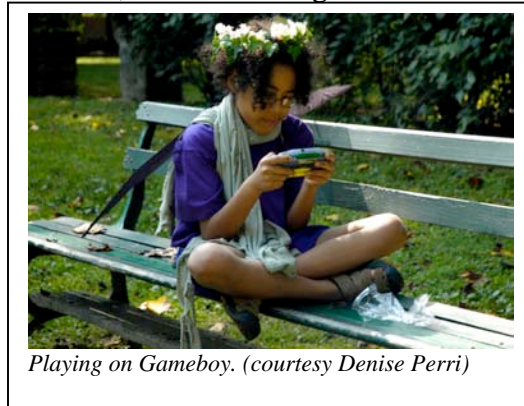
I would like to offer up the story of the loss of my own naiveté, in part because it shows how far I've come in my research, but also because this story reveals affordances of RL space. I had entered into my research without being aware of this tension between technophiles and Luddites and all shades in between. Attending this conference represented for me a sort of immersion into the subculture. The real world space provided me access to people who were not as keen on Internet use or social networking software. Here the means of exchanging contact information was writing phone numbers in my notebook.

I'd come to the conference telling people that my research focused on "how homeschoolers use digital media and the Internet." I quickly learned that there was such a thing as "unschooling" and just how central John Holt was to this movement. I then gauged, by the varying reactions from the folks at the conference, that my techno-utopian vision of homeschoolers embracing the Internet was indeed very naïve. Time and again, unschoolers questioned my opener: "What are you including when you say media? What exactly do you mean by digital technology?" This reframing of the actual issues at hand became clear to me during dinner with filmmaker Roland Legiardi-Laura, social-anarchist Matt Hern, Ken Danford, and one of his unschooling North Star teens. Matt Hern was particularly adamant that my usage of the term "virtual community" was oxymoronic. At this moment, it dawned on me that I needed to research the cultural history of this movement, which turned out to include a complicated mix of back-to-the-land, urban social-anarchist, and sometimes Luddite sentiments.

These subcultural traits move through individuals' personalities, not as abstractions. I later drove a Prius hybrid zipcar to Western Massachusetts in order to speak with some unschoolers about their reservations about media and technology. In short, the conference was a real life space to which I was granted access to networks of unschoolers I would not have encountered or would not easily met through online spaces. More importantly, I would come to realize the socio-cultural reasons for this difference between online and offline access to people.

On the flipside of the technology debate, I experienced a moment of great academic pleasure when I received an email from Rob, an unschooling dad in California.

He explained that he'd come across my links tagged "unschooling" in del.icio.us and he was curious about my research. We then went on to have a very fruitful interview. Sandra, an unschooling mother in New Mexico, writes prolifically on the



*Playing on Gameboy. (courtesy Denise Perri)*

web about her theories and concerns about unschooling. After coming across her online work a number of times, I noticed other informants referencing her. In this way, I came to desire an interview with her, seeing her as a prominent voice in the subculture. Ultimately, online grassroots networks helped to locate informants, and for them to find me—in Rob's case as well as some other folks on flickr. In the end, I'm aware that contacting folks through the Internet was increasing the likelihood of those unschoolers being early adopters or technophiles. Since I was conscious of this, I could then use this

as a topic of conversation in interviews. Most unschoolers were eager to discuss the debate on media and technology within the subculture.

I also actively used social networking websites such as Friendster, MySpace, and flickr to find interview subjects. Generally, I would perform searches using the word “unschooling.” I would then contact those individuals who seemed to self-identify as unschoolers in their profiles and according to their interests. This approach turned up sometimes surprising results, revealing the nuanced ways in which unschooling practices construct self-identity. For example, I contacted Danilo through Friendster because he’d listed “unschooling” as an interest. I explained my research and asked if he’d be amenable to an interview. His response cut to the heart of the issue of identity construction and unschooling:

*“Unfortunately for your research purposes, I don't think I'd be a good subject, as I couldn't in any real way call myself unschooled. I've read plenty of Illich and Holt, Grace Llewellyn, etc, but never had a real chance to release myself from school, both physically and mentally, until getting my BA last August. I did get my CHSPE (CA equivalent of a GED) and left high school halfway through junior year, but I then (after a six month break) headed straight to junior college and then to UC Berkeley. The general philosophies behind unschooling have definitely changed me, though, although I feel like I found out about it all just a little too late. I'd like to self-identify as an unschooler, but it might be an injustice to people who really have taken their education entirely in their own hands. Sometimes I believe that, but sometimes I really do think it's more a State of Mind.”*

—Danilo<sup>332</sup>

I'm interested in the ways in which unschooling constitutes a paradigm-shift that often moves more through identity and re-conceptualization of lifestyle, rather than simply qualifying according to age or government paperwork. I think this is in part due to the fact that unschooling resists labels and rules. Granted, there are some unschoolers who may make claims of being *more unschoolish than thou*, but I think this is generally frowned upon by the subculture. Danilo's graciousness in whether he qualifies or not

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<sup>332</sup> From Danilo's March 3, 2006 Friendster message to me.

points to those issues of inclusion and identity in researching subcultures. So, in fact, without even meaning to, he'd already informed my research by declining an interview! Holly, a fourteen-year-old unschooler, spoke with me about how she identifies herself to others: "I only really call myself an unscooler if I'm talking to other homescoolers/unschoolers. because if I'm talking to stangers and say 'I'm unschooled' then they always ask 'what's that?' ... so I try to keep to simple for them [*sic*]." <sup>333</sup> Holly and Danilo's responses reveal notions of identity and inclusion in the subculture, which come to light when accessing networks of people.

Because I used the phone interview, I was able to talk with folks from around the country and in a couple cases, Canada. Interviews included folks from California, Louisiana, New Mexico, Illinois, New Hampshire, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington, Wyoming, though the bulk of them were in Massachusetts. The affordances of the phone were obviously great, in that I could hear tone of voice. Interviews conducted in person were harder to come by. I had some difficulties gaining access to unschooling children, as unschooling parents often offered up their own views primarily, or spoke for their families, either for logistical or privacy reasons. I also had time constraints that prevented totally immersive fieldwork. Face-to-face interviews had to be local, as I had little time or budget to travel for the most part. I made a trip to stay with Matt Hern and his family in Vancouver when giving a paper at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference. The fieldwork I conducted yielded incredibly rich results in that I was able to observe real time family interactions and media artifacts within the context of their homes and unschooling centers. Further research, I hope, would make use of the fieldwork method.

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<sup>333</sup> In Holly's February 8, 2006 IM session with me.

I have changed names in some cases for the privacy of the families. Some families declined to participate in this study. In some cases, the government, their local public school systems, and mainstream neighbors have harassed unschoolers. It's important to keep in mind that they are subject to different constraints than the mainstream schoolers. This was somewhat problematic in convincing people to speak with me. Sometimes, I had to tactfully explain that I was not trying to expose them as neglectful of their children.

Once I'd made a connection with an unschooler, often they would pass on my information to other unschoolers or recommend others for me to contact. In this way, I used the "snowballing" methodology. This snowballing often mixed with the access to resources snowballing: because unschooling is such a grassroots subculture, I was able to contact many authors directly and solicit them for interviews. Because unschooling is a growing subculture and perhaps due to a recent spurt in mass media coverage, many of my friends had friends of friends with whom they could get me in touch. For example, I interviewed filmmaker Jason Marsh through a friend of a friend. After I'd been at it for a while, I was able to recommend people for unschoolers to get in touch with. My thesis in no way purports to have a random sampling of unschoolers, but rather, works through the grassroots mechanisms I was keen to explore.

### **Dialogic Methodology**

This thesis came about by talking with people and sharing ideas. I couldn't have written this thesis in a vacuum. Even if it had been a vacuum full of books, I believe that *reading* would not have accomplished *understanding* without the context I derived from

speaking to people about those books. According to Bakhtin, “utterances are not indifferent to one another and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another.”<sup>334</sup> Thus Bakhtin’s work is relevant to this thesis, particularly my use of the dialogic methodology in the fifth case study, *Legitimizing IM & TV*. Obviously, I use my methodological tools within the semantic realm of utterances with my interactions with unschooling informants taking place with our voices over telephone or in person. I observed informal voice in written text as well, both off- and online. But I would also classify those cyber-text-based methods we used—IM and email—as an intriguing mode of vernacular text that blurred the line between orality and cybercy. I also handwrote letters to some of the more anti-technology informants. For “Bakhtin the notion of voice cannot be reduced to an account of vocal-auditory signals...It applies to written as well as spoken communication, and it is concerned with the broader issues of a speaking subject’s perspective, conceptual horizon, intention, and world view.”<sup>335</sup> This methodology is reflective of the subculture’s predominantly dialogical nature, with its cultural history of vernacular critical theory and grassroots media.

Email and IM interviews were useful, particularly with kids who were online. I also had some requests from adults who preferred to write responses. As one mother told me in an email, “I’m not much of a talker ... It’s not a matter of shyness. I just can’t think and talk at the same time ;- ) But put a keyboard under my fingers and it’s hard to shut me up. If you’d like to send me your questions I can write back some pretty informative answers.”<sup>336</sup> In general I attempted to harness the power of an array of communication tools. I’ve chosen to do so while realizing the necessity to unpack the affordances and

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<sup>334</sup> James Wertsch quoting Bakhtin (p.109, *Voices of the Mind: Sociocultural Approach to Mediated Action*).

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51.

<sup>336</sup> From Joyce Fetteroll’s February 19, 2006 email.

limitations of those media technologies and the ways in which they intersect with the media practices I describe in this thesis.

In tandem, I used a dialogic methodology with people unfamiliar with unschooling as a way to formulate my ideas. As I wrote this thesis, I was taking an anthropology class, *Transformations of the Mind: The Role of Speech, Text, and Hypertext*, at Harvard with Catalina Laserna. This class was open-ended in that it allowed us to “build knowledge” using an experimental software tool called Knowledge Forum.<sup>337</sup> I used the real life place of the class and the computer-mediated space of the hyperlinked, socially networked software as a “salon” of sorts. Laserna and my classmates from Anthro 1740 played an important role as I brainstormed and refined thesis ideas. In sum, the process of writing this thesis records and reflects my dialogue with others, informed as they were through various mediations and contexts.

### **Co-construction of Media**

I think of this thesis as a collaboration. I knew I wanted to include many quotes from my informants, but I also offered rough drafts for them to comment upon and critique. My informants offered me raw material, then, but they also continued to push my thinking when they read and responded to my drafts and follow-up questions.

Because I'd met some unschoolers through flickr.com, I had an interest in visualizing the subculture within the body of my thesis with photos and other media. I also wanted to explore how unschoolers represented themselves and the subculture. I started asking my informants to send me photographs that they felt communicated ideas about unschooling or that illustrated stories they'd told me. I asked folks to take photos

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<sup>337</sup> <http://www.knowledgetforum.com/>.



of, as Sherry Turkle has said, “evocative objects.”<sup>338</sup> This proved to be a very fruitful approach. The importance of this methodology to my work became apparent when I gave a talk at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies conference in Vancouver. My presentation was almost completely filled with images from the unschoolers. Thus, I felt I was able to visually communicate that these are real individuals and also provide visual references to the media objects. Thus the photographs came to be a way of sharing media artifacts, and a way for my informants and myself to contextualize those media artifacts. Since I am writing about the socio-cultural practices that surround and inform those media artifacts, I found this approach useful. I believe it’s empowering for my unschooling informants and myself to collaborate in this way in the visualization and storytelling that goes into my thesis research.

Reflecting on my time spent doing fieldwork, I also entered into the community in another way. I bought and collected handmade objects from a number of unschooling moms. For example, from Lizette’s Etsy.com store, I purchased an embroidered pouch, inspired by her son’s drawing of a robot. I bought zines and a button that says “Riots not diets” from Sage. I bought the “Back to the Land” issue of the *Cometbus* zine. I had a number of reasons for doing this. Firstly, I felt an impulse to reciprocate: these unschoolers had spent time letting me interview them and I felt it would be a nice gesture to buy something from them. I also felt enthusiastic about the notion of participating in these DIY practices in which you support folks within a community, in some cases by giving feedback on their work, in some cases by buying their work. I wanted to experience this transactional relationship. On Etsy.com, I left a “review” of Lizette’s pouch and my experience buying from her. I felt I could participate in those systems of

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<sup>338</sup> Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*.

reputation and ratings. I also just plain wanted to hold and study the material objects in my hands. Part of DIY is the aesthetic and the aura of the handmade object. They also seemed for me anthropological artifacts. Ashley, the unschooling teen living with Matt and his family, gave me some of the zines and a calendar she'd made at The Purple Thistle. I also saved flyers and other media materials I collected at the *Learning in Our Own Way* conference. Gathering these objects, then, gave me something to hold on to and inspect while many of my interviews were virtual. Simultaneously, I connected and participated with my informants on another level: I became part of their co-construction of media objects as well.

## **Conclusion**

My methodology works through the practices I research. Access to tools and resources, as well as people, allowed me to analyze important unschooling texts and the raw materials that I would use in my thesis—quotes and images from unschoolers. But the pleasure and challenges of the hunt also informed the way I thought about how unschoolers use media and technology. In this way, I attempt to embody the participatory practices of unschoolers. Applying academic theory to material and experiences was a way to check the progress of my writing. I kept up with an evolving process of dialoguing with unschoolers and schoolers. In this way, I deepened my understanding of unschooling through a dialogical methodology, a process that unfolds over time and with experience. Finally, the end product is a thesis co-constructed with my informants. In the end, these methodological tools played a crucial role in coming to a nuanced understanding of unschoolers' participatory media practices.

**Conclusion:**  
**Learning with Participatory Practices  
in Self-Making & Subcultural Transformation**

While researching this road not often taken in education, I came across the image of a goddess, Hathor, an avatar created by Heather, California artist and unschooling mom. I was searching online for unschoolers and Hathor appeared, like a sort of patron saint of my thesis. Hathor seemed to embody all of the mix-n-match participatory practices I was theorizing. What was Hathor's creation myth?

*"I was in graduate school and I was working on a series of large-scale paintings*



*Heather in her paper-maché Hathor costume. (courtesy Heather Cushman-Dowdee)*

*about breastfeeding...I was an oil painter, and I had my daughter in my studio with me all day. She would be frolicking around on the floor. I would turn around and she'd have oil paint on her face and the only way you can get that off is to use turpentine. So I started using acrylic. So my work has evolved to make her safe and to have her involved. I started using sculpty, magic markers. I first starting doing the cartoon [because of this]*

*evolution of the media I could use with a child...The three dimensional breasts came about [when]...I started baking breast milk bread breasts and gluing them onto the canvas and performance art... In graduate school an older feminist told me she was never interested in breastfeeding because it would make her feel like a cow. So I started thinking that it should be something we should embrace, like*

*taking back the word ‘bitch.’ So I looked up the Egyptian cow goddess of breastfeeding and motherhood and midwifery, named Hathor.”—Heather<sup>339</sup>*

Hathor appears at a point of convergence along the road of unschooling: Third Wave feminism (breastfeeding, homebirth, La Leche League), DIY media (comics), performative-dialogic expression (puppets), anti-hierarchical relationships (making art with her kids), political activism (subversive political protest), naturalism (organic food, reuse and environmentalism), and high-tech-grassroots connectivity (Heather web-publishes her comics). At first, I thought the most striking thing about Hathor was the intensity of this hybrid figure, breastfeeding defiantly at the intersection of so many of these grassroots movements. But then I was struck by the difficulty I had reconciling how Heather’s quirky manifestation is so completely off the grid, and yet so many Americans are dissatisfied with public education and the other societal issues Hathor playfully addresses. Who, these days, is really happy with the state of K through 12 education? Why are we settling for the bottom line? What would it take for Hathor be a superhero in the United States?

...Well, a lot probably. But it seems to come so *naturally* for Heather.

Having traveled down this road not often taken for a year and a half, it’s clear to me that the participatory practices of the unschoolers make for an engaging, social, anti-hierarchical, experiential integration of media in everyday learning. Mostly, this thesis has explored—through micro, qualitative analysis of everyday practice in the *Five Unschooling Case Studies*—how culturally constructed learning takes place in this

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<sup>339</sup> Heather grew up in suburbia. “Maybe not every mom can go off and join Bread and Puppets, but we can draw about it and write about” these grassroots ideas. Heather and her husband tried going back to-the-land, but “not everybody can get 10 acres.” It wasn’t all they thought it would be and they felt isolated as artists in the countryside. So they moved to Los Angeles (from her December 6, 2005 phone interview with me).

subculture. For the unschoolers, learning is one part of a socio-cultural system—a complex system embedded in everyday life. Looking at their media and technology practices allows us to see the importance of these materials, the unschoolers’ conceptions of those materials, and the reciprocal and generative relationship between these expressive practices and subcultural identity. I’ve used analysis and theory to shine a light that catches those hidden structures in the ordinarily transparent connective soup in which we swim. The tension points in these case studies cause little ripples on the otherwise smooth surface of everyday life, giving me a toehold in the materiality of everyday life. My guiding question has been *why and how do we learn with media—and learn with the sort of joy that brings us close to our essential humanity?* I have spent much of this thesis answering the *how* part of that question.

But what is the meaning of these ordinarily hidden structures—a living version of Foucault’s archeology? While at this point, we don’t all live in an ideal world, and not everyone has the familial support and resources that would enable them to unschool, researching within the bounds of this subculture has been revealing in and of itself. But I find myself returning to Mead’s question, “*What, if anything, is to be done about school?*” and adding, *why is this question so important that these people have completely altered their lives and their conceptions of the world to become unschoolers?*<sup>340</sup> At this moment, unschooling is gaining in population. People talk about the public schools being at a breaking point, as people have been saying for years and years. New media and technologies beg questions about how we define learning and how we imagine ourselves, whether we identify with the mainstream or the underground. And yet, more and more, our country moves towards the bottom line in educating the vast majority of children.

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<sup>340</sup> p.72, Margaret Mead, *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years*.

For unschoolers, the bottom line is something quite different. Returning to Mary's description from the *Introduction* to this thesis, unschooling is “based on our own love of music and books and nature and the world.”<sup>341</sup> Such a bottom line is distinctly hard to quantify, and to a certain extent, “can only be answered on a local level,” as Matt Hern told me.<sup>342</sup> The question of whether such unschooling practices “scale” misses the mark. The question should be: how we can return the responsibility for learning to the people themselves. I feel there should be a partnership between technology and such grassroots, local control.

For me, it's important to ask the *why* question because the mainstream culture takes school for granted—we conflate learning and schooling. “The school is not a neutral objective arena; it is an institution which has the goal of changing people's values, skills, and knowledge bases. Yet some portions of the population, such as the townspeople, bring with them to school linguistic and cultural capital accumulated through hundreds of thousands of occasions for practicing the skills and espousing the values the schools transmit...In any case, unless the boundaries between classrooms and communities can be broken, and the flow of cultural patterns between them encouraged, the schools will continue to legitimate and reproduce communities of townspeople who control and limit the potential progress of other communities and who themselves remain untouched by other values and ways of life.”<sup>343</sup> Throughout my research process, I've reflected on my own family's practices and cultural capital, which shaped my upbringing and the way I think about learning. As someone whose life has pretty much revolved around over-achieving in school, it has been painful for me to call into question my

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<sup>341</sup> From my phone interview with Mary, December 11, 2005.

<sup>342</sup> From my fieldwork with Matt Hern, week of March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2006.

<sup>343</sup> p.367-9, Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways with Words*.

family's and my personal investment in education. So much of what I learned growing up came from the enriching activities we did outside of school: I can identify almost any tree in New England and know how to read a landscape for traces of the last ice age. I know this is weird. How did I come to know this stuff? Not through school, that's for sure. It must have been those walks I took with my father. My family engaged in many of the unschoolish practices, but my parents simultaneously emphasized the goal of winning in school and instilled a reverence for the institution, which has been both motivating and anxiety-provoking. My dad would give me money for straight A report cards.

While growing up, my siblings and I could watch TV but we had to bear the shame when our dad would walk in and call what we liked "crap" or "junk." In this thesis, I've written about how unschoolers debate what content is legitimate and whether that content should take precedent over skills and learning how to learn. Further research needs to be done on how learning for content and skills interact, without subjecting learning to the binary of content vs. skills. Unschoolers are making judgment calls, usually in favor of learning by doing and accessing content on one's own terms. That said, this thesis exposes that the sort of ambient content which unschooling kids come into contact with is very much shaped—however unconsciously or consciously—by the parents' supporting practices within the context of the subculture. Peter's love of opera or Eli's enthusiasm for the history of the Civil War offer intriguing, ironic instances of kids voluntarily coming to "high culture" content. The unschoolers' debate about television stands to question whether some unschooling parents would have encouraged or legitimized those activities had they been focused on purely pop cultural materials. This brings to light larger questions of the hierarchies of cultural materials in America. I

believe that the unschooling philosophy could work in any type of community, but it would require us to reevaluate what content we consider legitimate—or rather, who should decide.

I've learned something valuable from coupling the unschooling paradigm-shift with my academic analysis: I've been able to see those invisible practices which make learning much more enjoyable for children. Studying unschooling at the level of practice and language has been eye opening. The most profound aspect of unschooling is how it instills a love of learning. The danger is that either unschooling's detractors perfunctorily dismiss unschooling as madness, or its supporters embrace unschooling as attractive because it appears "natural" and reject most attempts at analysis, a defense mechanism because of their oppositional and minority status. This is precisely why I've written this thesis: we need to better understand how people use media and technology to learn outside of the institutional setting. And we need to understand this epistemology on a nuanced, personal level. In the age of standardized testing, that which can't be tested according to a powerful authority's rubric runs the risk of being completely written off. Children who don't achieve according to those standards are in danger of being ignored as a lost cause.

What, if anything, can be done about the lack of discussion about *learning*, rather than the habitual school talk about the bottom line? I chose to write this thesis in part because I'd never heard of the unschooling movement and because most people I know have never heard of it. Unschooling remains an underground movement, moving through grassroots means. But perhaps it will gain a critical mass because of its answer to the



*why* question: *because of love of learning, not the bottom line*. This, I believe, is what most people would answer if they thought they had a choice.

While this love of learning—this humanist philosophy—guides unschoolers, they constantly renegotiate what constitutes unschooling through their practices. Thus the technology debate reflects a dynamic subculture in the process of defining itself. The irresolvability of the debate to a certain extent mirrors the diversity of the geographically dispersed population, but also its strong cultural and political roots from the radical Left of the 1960s and 70s. These radical utopian visions set a precedent for a re-conceptualization of space, time and freedom—and consequently, the reconfiguring of attitudes and beliefs towards media and technology—the primary focus of my research. My conclusion is that the participatory use of media reflects and in turn shapes the subculture. The media communications that unschoolers often engage in, whether material or digital, are seeking—not always democratic consensus with the mainstream—a manifestation of utopian visions through practice.

It's daunting to consider all the factors that go into the way we practice learning, the norms we accept, the inequalities that other people's children endure and that we tolerate. I'm impressed by unschoolers' willingness to reinvent themselves, to take matters into their own hands in a DIY way. The draw of unschooling for me is the way kids and parents all engage in making meaning through participatory practices, and that they have a say in what counts as legitimate practice, that they have a say in what content is worthwhile. This, for me, is the essence of a profound, human experience of learning.

Benedict Anderson theorizes the nation state—how its use of the map, census and the museum—and I would add education—act as institutionalizing mechanisms. “The

‘warp’ of this thinking was a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control...The effect of the grid was always to be able to say of anything that it was this, not that; it belonged here, not there. It was bounded, determinate, and therefore—in principle—countable.”<sup>344</sup> Unschoolers imagine themselves—resistant to and thus in relation to—yet decidedly, off the grid. The grid is the mechanism that removes control from individuals and even the consciousness of their other options. Mary admits the frustration of this predicament: “I hate to say it but I see things clearer than other people. With schooling—if they could see it, they wouldn’t believe it. I sure am lucky that I see it. I’ve been there. I went to traditional school. It would be nice if they could see it. But unfortunately, I don’t think I’m going to convince anyone.”<sup>345</sup> I wish there were a way to be off the grid and grassroots, and yet effectual in social change.

The now tall blonde Eva, twenty years after I first met her, laughs about how she envisioned herself as a sort of superhero as a kid. In the café in Harvard Square, she hands me a drawing she did when she was young. It was an illustration for a story she wrote about a punky, tall, blonde heroine who fights the bad guys—corporate guys in suits. As a researcher working on an MIT



*Eva’s drawing of her punky heroine. (courtesy Eva Kendrick)*

<sup>344</sup> p.184, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

<sup>345</sup> From my phone interview with Mary, December 11, 2005.

thesis, I took the drawing from her. It's a mutual invitation to participate—in reconceptualizing our roles in learning, media, culture and everyday life.

## Appendix:

### *Del.icio.us*

For a socially-networked and tagged archive of unschooling link, please start with my Del.icio.us bookmarks: <http://del.icio.us/vanbertozzi/thesis>

### *Image List*

p.4: Photograph of the “Birthplace of Public Education” sign at Rehoboth town center, by Rad Rigsby, 2006.

p.15: Drawing inspired by *The Secret Garden*, by Eva Kendrick, 1991.

p.61: Photograph of Carsie with her marine life mural, taken by her mother around 1995, courtesy of Carsie.

p.70: Photograph of Peter and Richard reading together, 2005, by their mother Mary.

p.71: Photograph of Peter at their desk, 2005, by Mary.

p.76: Photograph of Michael’s favorite objects, some musical instruments, 2005, courtesy of Mary.

p.84: Photograph of Eli’s coop’s Civil War burst, by Marc, Eli’s dad, 2006, with permission of the group.

p.86: Photograph of Eli at the Civil War burst, 2006, by Marc.

p.87: Coop kids at the Civil War burst, 2006, by Marc.

p.95: Photograph of Aanan using a toy computer her older sister Mesa set up, 2005, by Jeremy Merritt, first appeared on flickr.com.

p.98: Screenshot of Carsie’s Friendster page, 2006, courtesy of Carsie.

p.100: Portrait of Carsie from her MySpace page, 2006, courtesy of Carsie.

p.103: The cover of the *Teenage Liberation Handbook*, 1998 edition, courtesy of Grace Llewellyn and Lowry House publishers.

p.105: Screenshot of the *Not Back to School Camp* LiveJournal community, 2005.

p.106: “Navigation,” a photo of Evyn by her mother Katie Shuflin-February, 2005, courtesy of Katie, first appeared on flickr.com.

- p.110: Drawing of role-play character “Mi” by Kathryn Fetteroll, 2006, courtesy Joyce and Kathryn Fetteroll, first appeared on Subeta.org.
- p.114: “Freedom,” a photo by Denise Perri of her son on a computer, 2005, courtesy of Denise, first appeared on flickr.com.
- p.125: Family portrait of the Dodds, c.2005, courtesy of Sandra Dodd, first appeared on SandraDodd.com.
- p.128: Screenshot of Instant Message with Sandra Dodd and Vanessa Bertozzi, 2005.
- p.129: Screenshot of email from Sandra Dodd, containing quoted IM from Holly Dodd, December 30, 2005.
- p.130: Screenshots of Kirby’s gameplay within *World of Warcraft*, courtesy of Kirby Dodd, Feb 22, 2006.
- p.146: Family portrait of Sage, Emily, and Bella, 2005, courtesy of Sage Adderley.
- p.147: Interior page of Emily’s drawing in *Dusty Wing#3*, an all ages zine, fall 2005, courtesy of Sage Adderley.
- p.150: Cover of *Dusty Wing #3*, “Not just cute: The musings, thoughts and schemes of the next generation,” fall 2005, courtesy of Sage Adderley.
- p.152: A page from *Hard Knox*, a zine by Sage Adderley.
- p.153: Photograph of Sage at her Sweet Candy Distro table at the Southeastern Swag market, 2005, courtesy of Sage Adderley, first appeared on flickr.com.
- p.155: Two-page spread from *Emily’s zine*, with a DIY Felt Bird Nest How-to and a photo of Emily, hard at work, courtesy Sage and Emily Adderley.
- p.157: Photographs of Selena and Sadie, Daisy and Matt, 2006, by Vanessa Bertozzi.
- p.159: Photographs of The Purple Thistle, its exterior in a redone warehouse and the zine library inside, 2006, by Vanessa Bertozzi.
- p.160: Photography of Sadie Couture reading a zine she’d worked on, 2006, by Vanessa Bertozzi.
- p.162: Photograph of a zine called “High School is a Factory” from The Purple Thistle’s zine library, 2006, by Vanessa Bertozzi.

p.165: Screenshot of Lizette Greco's homepage with an image of one of her customized bags featuring an image from her son Enzo's drawing of robots, 2005, courtesy Lizette Greco, first appeared on LizetteGreco.com and Etsy.com.

p.166: One of Heather Cushman-Dowdee's *Hathor the Cowgoddess* cartoons, 2005, courtesy of Heather Cushman-Dowdee, first appeared through Heather's email distribution.

p.168: Photograph of Matt Hern hanging out with some of The Purple Thistle kids in East Vancouver at a barbecue and customized-bike party, 2006, by Vanessa Bertozzi.

p.179: Photograph of her child playing a Gameboy, 2005, courtesy Denise Perri.

p.187: Photograph of Heather Cushman-Dowdee in her *Hathor the Cowgoddess* costume, c.2005, courtesy Heather Cushman-Dowdee.

p.194: Drawing of punky spy girl and corporate bad guys, c.1991, by Eva Kendrick.

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Blanton, Carsie

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Blanton, Vlad

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Boyce, Nika

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Cornell, Katrina

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Cushman-Dowdee, Heather

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Danford, Ken

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Davis, Derek

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Dewey, Vernon

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Doman, Ashley

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Ekwa Ekoko, Beatrice, and Randy Kay

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Hern, Matt

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Marsh, Jason

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Medina, Peter

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Merritt, Jeremy

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Norsigian, Judy

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Roy, Dan

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Shafiq, Tiara

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Sheffer, Susannah, and Aaron Falbel

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Shemitz, Jon

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Shuflin-February, Katie

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Stephens, Sphennings

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X, Danilo

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X, Eli, Sue, and Marc

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