



The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

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Born:

“The journeyer is at home while underway, at home on the road itself, the road being understood not as a connection between two definite points on the earth’s surface, but as a particular world. It is the ancient world of the path...”

— Karl Kerényi, in *“Hermes Guide of Souls,” Spring Publications, 1987, p. 15*

JH:

I’ve done just about every form of education there is. I initially went to public school until I was in 7th grade, then we moved to Maryland and I went from a school that had somewhere around 300 kids to a middle school that had 3,000 kids. In the school I came from I was so involved: I knew everybody, I was the head cheer leader and the morning announcement girl. At the new school my Mom was talking to the middle school councilor and the councilor said, “The pecking order has already been established. You might want to try something else.”

I had been in the gifted programs all through elementary and middle school and all that they did was give me an extra book report. That’s not challenging you, that’s punishing you for learning quickly. So we tried home schooling.

Home schooling worked for my sister but it didn’t work for me, I needed to be in a class — I didn’t like doing my homework on-line, I didn’t like doing it on a computer — I liked being where someone was talking with me, talking *to* me.

In 9th grade, by a series of random events, I dual enrolled in our local community college as both a home-schooler and as a full-time college student. It was a small college with a student-teacher ratio of 13 or 14 to one. It was great. It didn’t really feel like college, mainly because I was getting the highest scores out of all the kids in my classes!

I’m a very audio-visual learner and I was really *getting* that experience where I was being told information. Being in a community and having peer competition helped me, especially wanting to improve myself and be better than other college students.

That’s where I started to excel. It’s weird because when I look back I wasn’t really, like, spending hours at my books every night; if something came up I would do it.

We’d thought that I would go to Carol Community College for two more years but because of my Dad’s job we relocated to Atlanta at the end of my 9th grade year. We found this school called the Burrow Academy, on the campus of Burrow University. It was an all-girls private school and I was lead to believe that it was a place where high school girls could take college courses. I went there thinking this will be great! I was so excited that I’d found the best of both worlds: like Carroll Community College but I’d get to be with high school girls.

I get there and find that only one senior is taking a night art class at the college. (laughs) They tell me, “Well, we don’t think college classes would really fit into your schedule and we’re only



willing to give you half credit for each one.” If I took college classes I would never have been able to graduate! So I suffered there for a year.

At the end of the year we don't know what we're going to do. Burrow doesn't work, there isn't any other private school, and at all the local colleges you had to be at least 16 in order to dual enroll.

About a month before we had heard about the Advanced Academy. So I asked my Dad, “Hey Dad, what about one of these (sleep away) schools?” And he's, like, “No, no. It's too early for you to be leaving home.” But then my Mom started saying, “We need to do what's best for Jessica, not what we want.” I told my Dad, “It's not like I really spend that much time with you guys anyway.” When I was at Burrow I'd be at drama practice and I'd come back at 6:30, go upstairs and do homework, come down have dinner, go back upstairs and talk on the phone or go on the computer. “I didn't spend that much time with you guys.”

I found out the Academy was the best of both worlds. I could be with kids my age, and with college kids at the same time. There's just something to that. I've used this analogy once or twice: if you look at education as a race, and if you're running the race with people who are slower than you, you naturally tend to slow down and find ways to stay ahead of the group by just jogging.

In college I find that I'm running this race with people who are running faster than me, and that encourages me to run faster. And being in a dorm with high schoolers gives me a more whole experience in that I'm not lonely, and I feel that's OK to be smart, it's OK to be working on a paper.

I found that I tend to procrastinate the most out of all my friends. My friends would always say, “Oh, Jessica always gets the best grades!” and, “Jessica is always the smartest one!” But now my roommate is a lot smarter than me and that's a cool thing. I totally embrace that.

LS:

Do you find yourself in situations with people who are more advanced than you and you can't keep up at their level?

JH:

I had this American Lit. class with people who were much smarter than I, not smarter than I but who really understood and could draw in other concepts from literature. I would sit and just listen to these two guys go back and forth with these theories. I did OK in that class, I got a B.

Then I went to my British Literature class this semester and suddenly *I'm the one* who's presenting all the cool theories! (laughs) I'd listen to somebody else's theory and I'm like, “Yeah, you could have totally gone ten times deeper with that! What about that... and if you're looking at the same time period let's draw on this... and let's come up with some theological conclusions about that...!” It's been a cool learning experience. I almost want to tell one of those guys, “You know, I listened to you last semester and this semester I'm you. I'm the annoying kid who comes up with all the intimidating ideas and who everybody else wants to argue with!” (laughs)



One of the coolest classes I took here was a marketing class taught by the president of the university. The second half of this class was based upon a project. We had to go out and find a local business in Carrollton and provide marketing research and analysis for them. We had to create fliers and we had to get, like, 380 respondents to our questionnaires and then come up with all of these conclusions. For my first semester of being a junior I did marketing research for the president of the university! That was so cool!

LS:

Tell me more about that project. What did you find out?

JH:

Well, our company was Bath and Body Works. We thought that, well, they're a business and we could draw some interesting conclusions. The conclusions weren't anything too terribly remarkable, but they were things as far as customers' preferences in that... if customers are shopping for other people then they're more likely to come in to the store if the doors are open. Something like that. We had some really interesting conclusions about who they were shopping for and when they would shop. Not as far as day of the week, but as far as if they would shop when they just got their pay check, just different things like that.

It wasn't too terribly unforeseen, but they were conclusions that greatly helped the local business. For example, keeping the doors open, that's a huge incurred cost for them to heat and cool the store. They wanted to know whether or not that was actually making a difference, and what type of shoppers it was encouraging.

LS:

So think back. You have a lot of drive. Can you remember when you got it. How did you get to being so excited about stuff?

JH:

When I was in the public school system I don't ever think of college. I was in middle school, but I was completely concerned about who my friends were and the activities I was doing. I seriously believe that if I stayed in the public school system I would have come to my senior year and said, "Wait, now I have to apply to college." It wouldn't have been a focus; I would have been completely concerned with having fun.

I'm not sure but I think I can attribute a lot of my drive to that transition of going to college in 9th grade. My grades were starting to go down the last month that I was in 7th grade in public school in Pennsylvania. In Maryland, where I home-schooled for all of 8th grade, I was pretty much like, "I don't care. School is completely boring and a waste of time." It was on the computer and I didn't get it. I didn't know what they were trying to teach me.

In 7th grade I didn't care. In 8th grade I was frustrated, fed up and, therefore, I didn't care. And then in 9th grade the excitement of being in class... I don't know if it's just me or if it's people that just have this natural competitive edge, but I liked being tested to some extent. It's like a game, and when you are home-schooling you're learning just to learn.



When I went to college there was this excitement, this cool factor of, “I’m going to go to college! It’s not going to be busy work. I’m going to be in a classroom with other adults.” I initially did really well: I got a 4.0 through my entire first year in college. And it’s not like they were really easy courses. I took a political science class, I took music theory, I took a theatre course, I took reading, I took English, several maths — which really secured my foundation in math.

I never really talked with any of the other college students. I was very independent. From that year on I grew up a lot in terms of my maturity and my independence and my drive. It wasn’t like I was learning because I had to learn: I was there because I wanted to be there. There’s something in that, in that mind-set that set me forward. If I really wanted to home-school I probably would have flourished there, but there is just something different when it’s what you want to do, and do well in. I just loved it.

LS:

This sort of sounds like a bit of an accident because you said you were not that interested in school in 7th grade, and then in 8th grade you kind of endured the program, and then this thing that you went into in 9th grade was not really school as you knew it either, because it was so different. Did you have an expectation that going to college in 9th grade was really going to be a neat thing for you?

JH:

When I say I was really excited about school, let me just clarify: I did not go home and say, “Wow, this is so interesting! I want to learn more about this!” I did not do that at all! I would just go to class, I’d listen, I’d take it in, and I was really good in memorizing and, not necessarily regurgitating but I could just output all that I’d learned. I didn’t really have to study. I don’t know if it was because of a lack of distraction in class or just motivation to do well.

There was an excitement to feeling that this was a solution. My 8th grade year had been so frustrating and we knew that something needed to change. We were dreading entering me in the local high school where they’ve got signs on the door that say things like “Marijuana Kills!” and they’ve got a big problem with drugs. I didn’t want to be there with other kids who didn’t want to be there. I’m so frustrated when I’m in a class with students who don’t want to be in the class.

One of the cool things that I’ve kind of discovered in my learning has been becoming more aware of what was going on at the time, like in religion, in literature, I can relate all the different ideas together and things start flowing, and that’s cool to me. I’ll hear something either in British Lit. or American Lit. and I jump off this deep end of, “So that’s why!” Or I jump off with thoughts like, “I wonder if he was writing this when…” and I start going on with that. That really helps me be engaged.

During my first two or three weeks of history I’d sit there and just zone out. But now, even though the teacher hasn’t changed, and I don’t know if it’s because there’s 80 people in the class and 30 of them are failing and I feel this edge, and I’m, like, “Oooo, this is kind of a dog-eat-dog world. You have to prove yourself — you have to do well in this class. You can’t just slack off.”

LS:



It sort of sounds like you really respond to being fed stuff. What do you think about these projects where people say, “OK, come back in 6 months and show me what you’ve done?”

JH:

The idea of that is quite intimidating. If you had asked me the same question last year I think I would have said, “That sounds too scary! I don’t think I can do that.” But this year I’ve taken on more independence, even in my math classes. Last year in both of my math classes I had two good friends, really good friends, and it was really easy to turn to them and go, “Hey, what did you get?” Or, “Hey, I don’t get this.” But this year there is a sense of independence and I feel that if I can’t get a problem I’m not going to try to turn to a friend, instead I’m going to think on it. It’s just a small baby step but I’m tapping into that sense of complete independence and motivation.

I think it’s easy to be motivated when you’re with other people. Either they’re motivated and therefore you’re motivated, or you’re motivated because they’re not motivated. So it’s like, “Hm, I want to be a step above them.” A lot of it is competitiveness, but then when you’re all alone what are you really striving for? You’re striving to get it done. There’s no time for recognition, it’s just you.

LS:

What’s you feeling about things that aren’t rewarded? I’m thinking about artists and writers who just do things because they think it’s important, and there’s often no appreciation at the other end. Or maybe nobody understands their work. Are you repelled by that idea of doing something that no one would understand or that no one would appreciate?

JH:

No. I could do that if that was what motivated me. If my motivation was purely in getting out what I felt inside, then I could do it.

I was in this speaking competition this summer. There was a national speaking contest that was kind of like a spelling bee. It was trying to find the best high school orator in the United States. 15,000 kids were invited and 250 students sent in tapes. I sent my 3 minute tape in and, as I’ve told you, I always had this knack for public speaking.

I got into the top 10 and they flew me down to DC with my Mom to do this competition. Everybody was given a different topic and my topic was “My Message for America.” My message was about embracing the continent of Africa by getting involved with the lives of the people, because Africa is something that’s very dear to my heart, that entire continent, especially Kenya.

I also told you that I procrastinate. So a lot of times my public speaking is very fresh, like when I get there it’s usually the first time I’m doing it. As everybody else was giving their practice speech I was sitting in the back of the room writing my speech and trying to memorize it. My Mom was sitting next to me going, “You should have done this last night! You should have done this weeks ago!” (laughs)



We had to speak in front of 600 10th graders. Ann Compton was one of our judges; the 10th ranked judge in the court system as one of our judges; and the president of George Washington University was one of our judges.

The competition was between the top ten and they picked my name out to go first. That seriously hindered me because the 1st and 2nd place winners were the second to last people to go. I won 3rd place.

When I stood on stage the energy was so alive! I had the responsibility of molding that energy and bringing attention, it was just incredible. People were coming up to me afterwards while they were scoring and kids were swarming me. I felt like this amusement park character because people were saying, “I got goose bumps!” The girls in front of me were sniffing and crying like, “You moved me so much!” I kept getting that and it was like, “Wow! I’ve already won.”

From that experience I really learned my bliss. Bliss meaning something that absolutely makes me feel alive, in that energy of being on stage.

LS:

Did you feel that power while you were speaking? Were you channeling that energy by being emotional, or were you working the strength of your argument?

JH:

I wasn’t doing an emotional thing, it was the strength, it was the dynamic. It’s like this energy — even when I’m talking to you now — if you can you imagine me talking about a very serious topic and feeling the truth go out and sink in.

There were speakers who were emotional, and they got different responses. I knew that there were exclamation points in my energy going out to them, and in their energy coming back. I didn’t know how it was going to affect them. I didn’t know if they were going to be like, “Wow. Hmm. Cool.” I didn’t think I’d make anybody cry, but apparently I got three girls to cry! (laughs) And that was cool. I discovered my power as a speaker, and so that’s when I thought, “Hmm, maybe I want to be a speaker for a living. Maybe I’ll be an inspirational speaker.” I still don’t know.

There was a time in my life when I had everything planned out. I knew where I was going to go to school. I knew how long I was going to go to school, I knew what I was going to be: a broadcast journalist. I had my entire life planned out up until I was 23. This was in 9th grade.

Now I’m feeling that when I’m a certain age I know I’ll have the qualities — maybe that’s not the word — I know that I’m going to be confident and happy in whatever I’m doing, because I’m confident and happy now — not in the bad kind of confident — but I’m at peace. I’m not worried, and I don’t stress, and I’m cool with everything. I just have this faith that when I’m there it’ll be fine.

LS:

Tell me a little about the difference between bad confidence and good confidence, since you put it in those terms.



JH:

When I define confidence I think of being assured in my strengths, knowing that my strengths are supported by what I know. I think that bad confidence can be when you base your strengths on what you feel, or what you feel you know, so there's not really anything supporting it. So while you're strong in those, it's questionable how strong or secure you are as a person.

I think my confidence has come from my strengths, from being challenged and being shot down and being evaluated. In 9th grade I thought I was pretty smart, pretty analytic, and that I could come up with some pretty cool conclusions for a paper, and I could, but I BS'ed a lot. It passed for a few teachers but in this American Lit. class, after I got my first paper back I thought, "Wow, I was BS'ing, and I've BS'ed a lot of papers before." I had made these conclusions because they sounded right but I didn't put all of my mental power into it.

After that I would sit in class and watch these two guys debate. They were putting all of what they knew, using their strengths, and they were applying it in new ways. I was listening and thinking, "Hmmm".

My confidence has become what it is today because it's been evaluated, it's been strengthened, and it's been hardened. I'm not the smartest I'm ever going to be, that's constantly growing and I'm going to continue to be shot down, evaluated, and then built back up stronger. I have this faith that a strong foundation can be wilted down but it will build back up even stronger. You know what I mean?

When I think about it, the one thing that I've always struggled with since beginning my education has been apathy. I'm very motivated, and I get in these situations because I was motivated, but then I became undriven.

There would be times when I wouldn't study and I'd still pull off these amazing grades, but then I would think, "OK, I really can't save this to the last night, to the last minute. I have to focus on this." And that's something that's still growing. It's this new motivation, this motivation that I'm not doing it because I'm supposed to, I'm doing it so I can get into a good college someday.

Last year I felt that my strengths were being supported by stilts, stilts being unsecured foundations. I've been in so many situations where I was the best of the best that it kind of lifted me up, not in an ego sense but it lifted up who I thought I was and defined the strengths that I thought I had. Being the best of the best in 9th grade made me think I was smarter than I really was. Then, when I got here and started college classes I started feeling, "Hold on — under construction! — this isn't really as full as I thought it was!"

My motivation stems from not wanting to be the fastest, and not wanting to be the best. I'm not driven to get things done the fastest. I don't see any benefit in that. There are kids in the program who are taking 20 hours of credits, and I just don't see how that would benefit me, it would probably make things worse. I find that growing this rock, this foundation, is more important.