



The Learning Project

by Lincoln Stoller

Sonya Peters: Student

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Born: 1990 in Riverdale, New York

SP:

I started school at Cahill Elementary School in Saugerties when I was 5. I was in grade school all the way to 6th grade. I was never able to stick with the structure of elementary school. Ever since kindergarten I skipped half the school year (laughs). Monday, Wednesday and Friday I might go to school but Tuesday and Thursday I wouldn't.

LS:

How did you get out of it?

SP:

In kindergarten I was too tired to go to school and I'd sleep while being dragged down to the car or up to the bus stop, and the bus driver wouldn't take a sleeping child on the bus. In second grade I got stomach aches. The stomach aches lasted from 2nd grade to 4th grade. And from 4th grade to 6th grade I got headaches. Somewhere in there the stomach aches would start in school and I'd go to the nurses office and I'd leave school that way. A lot of grade school was really spent trying to get out.

At the end of 6th grade I basically just lost it, and left school, and tried to get to 7th grade. Did two weeks of 7th grade; I was enrolled for two weeks but went to school for 3 days (laughs). Junior High wasn't for me. Then I went to Sudbury, two weeks after they first opened. I curled up on a chair and would go to sleep every day. And then they closed. And that was Sudbury!

LS:

What did you get out of it?

SP:

Out of the first year? Nothing. It was just a bunch of screaming kids. Actually, what I got out of that was, by the end of it there were lots of bicker battles between the staff and the parents. The parents and the staff thought they knew how the school should go and what the school was good for and they weren't listening to the kids at all. And these were *our* school meetings, they weren't *their* school meetings. I sat through every one of those meetings completely silent, and near the very last meeting I said, "Shut up! This is my school meeting, not your school meeting. Stop fighting. Just stop. It's not getting us anywhere." That was one of the last school meetings before the school fell apart.

After that I home schooled — or unschooled, or whatever you call it — with Ruth (Ruth was a staff member at the Sudbury School and a former teacher. — ed.). I went to her house every day and walked on the ice — she had a little creek by her house — and looked at the dead frogs underneath the ice (laughs). When March came we walked through the creek barefoot and felt



like our feet were going to fall off because it was real cold. We ran around in the woods a lot. That's what I did.

We tried to breed mice to find out the genetics of how mixing different colored mice would give different colored babies (laughs). I didn't actually carry it through because I should have made charts and done all that stuff, but I was more interested in the baby mice. She bred snakes and I was interested in the snakes eating the baby mice. There were cats, snakes, and mice, which kept me interested.

Then Sudbury started up again. I was 13 or 14 and I did some of the work to try to get the school going again, and I learned a lot about what we were doing. I was with the process the whole time, trying to get the school going again. I saw the new building being built. The school finally opened and I was one of five or so kids who carried over from their first year.

School started in the spring, and then it closed for the summer after a month. I went the next year and was there for year. But even at Sudbury I had attendance problems like, "I don't feel like going. I can learn more at home." I was constantly struggling with trying to do the structured public school thing.

I wanted to do math. I wanted to sit down with a math book and do math. I wanted to learn... whatever. I mean I didn't understand the Sudbury approach. I was confused, very confused.

LS:

Can you summarize the Sudbury approach?

SP:

The Sudbury approach was take a bunch of kids, stick them in a building, give them some books and some computers and some friends and they'll figure it out. They'll figure it out. So what am I supposed to be figuring out?

I read a lot about vampires (laughs)... I laid around a lot and thought about things. Watched how the little kids played together and thought about communication between human beings and children. Watched the little kids bicker and develop in different ways. "She stole my toy," and "she didn't share her lunch with so-and-so." That was mostly what I did: communication skills. But I never understood what I was supposed to be learning.

I thought learning was ABC, English, Science, Social Studies, and so on. I didn't feel like I was getting that. Especially because I entered that school saying "I'm going to be here a year, then I'm going to leave and go to the community college. Go to community college for two years and then leave with an associates degree at the age of 18. Be well on my way to success and go to a 4-year college for the last 2 years, get a bachelors, and then head on to veterinary school. That didn't work (laughs)! Didn't work as planned.

I thought Sudbury was going to prepare me for Ulster Community College but it didn't. I wanted to sit down and do work. Sudbury's idea of work was something else. The system was all confused.

I stayed there another half a year and they gave me a notice that said, "You've missed 40% of the school year," and it was January or something like that, so I missed a lot of school. I said, "OK, well, Mom either you let me leave school, or I just don't go any more and the school just



kicks me out (laughs)!” She said, “OK, you can leave school.” I left school and was home schooled for the remainder of the year. So really, up to this point, it’s been complete mush of home schooling, and unschooling, and Sudbury schooling. It was horrible.

LS:

What happened when you got out of Sudbury and went home?

SP:

I just sat around and just tried to recover. I didn’t have Ruth because she was working. I think I actually started playing an on-line video game and I didn’t stop for 6 months. I just played on the computer. Made some good friends, that was my social group thing. My day was go to sleep at 6am, wake up at 6pm, get on the computer, stay on-line, go to sleep at 6am. Avoid family. That was my education for the rest of my 10th grade year.

LS:

What did you get out of that, anything that people might not recognize?

SP:

Socially it was very unique because you can make lots of friends, even though it’s cyber all over the internet, all text messaging and stuff. I made some really great friends and I’d talk to people from Germany and Austria and England, Indonesia, and a really good friend from Malaysia. I ended up going on-line trying to find out what language they spoke in Malaysia.

She’d tell me, “Oh, I speak English!”

“But you’re on the other side of the world! You’re not supposed to speak English!”

There’s something called Skype, which is a VOIP, Voice Over Internet Protocol, I love that word. So we talked a lot over Skype while playing the game. We’d play the game and we’d talk. It was like a party except everyone was there all the time, and you can kill them at any time by just pulling the plug (laughs)!

Then Mom said, “you have to start doing school again if you want to become a vet.” So at the beginning of this year I found a private, very, very traditional German school that has 48 kids in total and is run by the Bruderhof community.

So I go from hippie kids at Sudbury, who are running around playing Digimon and Magic Cards — I don’t know what all they did, the little ones always had something they were doing — to this classroom full of all these Christian kids. Very Christian kids. And their views are, “got to get an A, got to get an A, got to get an A.” I went from really relaxed to perfectionistic: “you’ve got to do it this way.”

I’m very attuned to people’s facial features and stuff, like when they’re talking and expressing emotion. And some of these kids would be so full of anguish when they looked at their paper that you could tell it wasn’t an A. It could have been a B, but it wasn’t an A. Something about being in this environment was frustrating, to say the least.

Here I am. I haven’t done any school for 4 years. Haven’t done any math — I’m doing pre-algebra right now — and I’ve got these dreams of vet school. You’ve got to do calculus to get in



to vet school, to even *contemplate* getting in to vet school. So I'm in pre-algebra, I'm planning on going to college in a year and a half, and how am I ever going to catch up?

I'm in this school with a bunch of kids who are overachievers, who have been told what their careers are going to be — they didn't even choose them — they've been told what they're going to be and they've got to work towards it.

A girl in my class was told she's going to be a nurse. She's 15 years old. I'm actually placed in the 10th grade class, although I'm an 11th grader, because it's very accelerated. And the 10th and 11th graders are together for most of the stuff, except for the sciences. So this friend works toward being a nurse. She never said she wants to be a nurse but she's now working toward doing something because that's what she's expected to do.

LS:

This is the way the Bruderhof community works, right?

SP:

Right, because you can't have everybody wanting to be doctors and nobody wanting to be plumbers. So they spread it out a little bit.

LS:

They're expecting these people to stay in their community, so they're telling their members to train for the skills their community will need.

SP:

So that was different. I mean here I am with dreams to be something big, something wonderful. It's *my* dream, and I work toward *my* dream. And here are these kids who are pounding away at the books trying to get A's for dreams that are not even their dreams. And I'm sitting there feeling... like... I've been dreaming my dream for 8 years, since I was 9 years old, and working toward it since I was 9 years old.

It's just frustrating, really frustrating, to be in this environment where you're told, "This is how it works. You get the A's here, here, here, and here. Study for Regents. Study for the SATs. Memorize these words for the SATs." It's a world of tests and numbers and letters and it makes your head spin (laughs)... really, really bad.

I went to school there for two months and all of a sudden started becoming absent again: absent through elementary school, absent through Sudbury, and now I'm absent from this traditional school. I actually skipped school today, and yesterday, and the day before.

LS:

Are you in control of this, or not?

SP:

I, uh, I... half, only half. I don't know. Even when you have this dream, even when you have something that you really want to do, I feel like there's some stuff you can't control.



Sometimes I get really depressed because things aren't working the way I want them to. And at a certain level of being depressed I go on-line and look at colleges. I don't know why, but something says that if I look at colleges enough, then I'll be motivated to do the work to get to the college. It's not like I don't want to get there already, but I'm trying to find a motivation that actually makes me want to do the work.

My newest plan is, "Mom, if I go to school until February, then will you send me to South America?" Because I found a 3-month high school program in South America for girls. You send your girl away to high school, and then you have to wake up and go to school, whether you like it or not, because you're in South America. And school's on top of mountains, so it's different than sitting in a classroom. I felt like that might be the middle ground between Sudbury, where there's no structure, and the Bruderhof school, which has a lot of structure. Somewhere in there I think I'm going to figure it out so that I can become a vet. I don't know how (laughs)! I'm working on it.

LS:

What was it that you wanted to learn when you were 9 that you still can see?

SP:

I remember that I wanted to be a doctor because a doctor was looked upon as the highest profession you could be, even though it's not the richest. Other people would say, "I want to be a doctor when I grow up." But I wanted say, "Yeah, but I *really am* going to be a doctor when I grow up!" I felt like I was smart enough to do it and had enough will power to do it.

Then I decided that people complain too much (laughs), and I found out that I like fuzzy things more than people. So I fell in love with critters and decided I wanted to be an animal doctor.

I think it has to do with the cute factor: hamsters are cuter than people, puppies are cuter, horses are cuter (laughs). I also think there's less stress with operating on someone's cat, than operating on someone. If you accidentally kill the cat you didn't kill a human being, you just killed a cat, which is also bad but it's less stressful.

Just recently I got interested in psychiatry, watching a psychiatrist for a while, but then decided people complain too much.

LS:

What pulled you into that?

SP:

Lots and lots of experience with mental illness in 6th grade.

LS:

So you got interested in people again?

SP:

Yeah, to understand people only in order to understand myself more. I felt like maybe it was a secret puzzle and that it would help me unlock the problems that I had myself because I decided



the attendance issue was really something else. First I decided I was interested in psychiatry, and then decided it wasn't for me.

I've always been interested in health, and health sciences. I've been trying to convince my Mom to let me become an EMT last year because there was a course to become an EMT in one semester that met every Saturday. One day a week. I said to myself, "I can do this, I can get to school one day a week." The problem is the class met from 9am to 5pm. I can do this, I can be an EMT. That's awesome! I don't know why I want to be an EMT but why not? But I couldn't because I had to be 18 or older. So that kind of killed that inspiration. I'm still thinking about it because then I could work for Wayfinder as their wellness person.

LS:

Tell me about Wayfinder.

SP:

Wayfinder is a live-action role-playing camp for kids ages 6 to 19. You run around in the woods with swords and fairy wings, and it's fun. More than that it's a community of friends. We have workshops that cover issues like trust and status and improv.

You take a kid with very little self-esteem whose giving off the "I'm shy" thing, and you teach him how to trust other people, how to read what other people are doing, and to know why people seem to have higher status than him. You teach him how to look big, how to feel big, and how to speak big for improv, then all of a sudden you've turned a kid with very low self-esteem into a kid that actually feels good about living. That's what I first got out of it: friends and becoming a person that at least pretends to be big and tough.

After that I got in to story writing, writing the adventure games. That was my home schooling for a while: it took me six months to write an adventure game based on a dream. I put it on as a production for 80 people. It was amazing and I won awards through Wayfinder.

I almost got "Best Story of the Year", which is impressive because there are, like, 20 stories. This was my first story. I got "Best New Story Writer", which I gave up immediately to my friend so we could share it because we were both new storywriters. And "Best Story Concept", which made me feel good.

That was my home schooling. My Mom says "You did do stuff when you home schooled!"

"No, I just laid around."

"No" she said. "You did do stuff!"

LS:

So she was supportive? Most mothers wouldn't have let you do even a small portion of what you've done.

What is your attitude toward being a woman with regard to the programs you've been in. I'm wondering why you were interested in this all-girls South American high school program.



SP:

Well, it was the only program I could find. I've also looked into women's programs. I've looked at a college that's only for women because for some reason I felt like being in an all-women's college would make all the other factors less, because guys are stressful. I haven't really gotten involved with many, but the ones I got involved with made my life really stressful. So I said, "maybe if they don't exist! Maybe if they only exist off-campus."

But I connect with guys more, most of the time, as friends. So I don't know if I'd be able to deal with only interacting with women. It would be kind of traumatizing to my whole life.

LS:

So what's your attitude about stress? You didn't really say it, but it seems that stress is a thread that runs through what you said. I mean with headaches and stomach aches, the whining of people and the cuddliness of animals, and the contrast between the high and low pressure schools. How do you deal with your own stress?

SP:

Well, I'm going to bring this into an area that I call dissection, because that's what I've been calling it for the last while. At the end of 6th grade I was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder, which lots of people have been diagnosed with. So I was 12 years old being diagnosed with a disorder that usually doesn't appear in people until they're 18 or 19.

There's a famous psychiatrist named K. Redfield Jameson and she got through graduate school and wrote a book on bi-polar disorder, and mostly it was coming from studying herself, which I thought was kind of interesting.

So I started relating the manic-depressive spikes with the way I learned and found that in the beginning of the school year, September, October, November, I'd go way up. So during September, October, November I'd do really well in school. Get lots of A's.

End of November stop going to school, stop getting A's, everything goes down. November, December, January everything is down, down, down. Also known as "seasonal affective disorder", so when it gets dark I get sad.

January, February, March everything is heading back up. April, May, June I'm getting A's, A's, A's, A's. The beginning and the end of the school year is lots of A's.

On top of that, when I'm manic, when I'm really happy and really into learning I can turn out amazing stories, amazing papers, everything. I read stuff on-line, do lots of research on-line and do 20 times what a normal human should be doing at my age academically. But when I get depressed I stop doing everything completely.

So I've decided the days I miss are days when I'm depressed, and if I sat in school I wouldn't be able to do anything anyways. And the days I'm not depressed I actually go to school. And the days I'm manic I'm too busy thinking about wanting to go outside and look at blades of grass, rather than sitting in a room looking at a chalk board.

I like dissecting problems of interest. The problem with schools is that they say, "Here, taste this! Taste this! OK, I'm going to take that away now and give you something else." Like, "We're



going to learn really minor things about the heart, now we're taking that away and we're going to learn about the lung..." But I say, "The heart's interesting! I'm interested in the heart. I don't want to learn about the lung!" What's with this? I'm still stuck on the heart!

I found that I can learn in a structured environment if a teacher says, "this week we'll learn about the stuff in this chapter. This chapter is called 'The Heart'." And then I leave and — in my own time — I dissect that. I go on-line and read about it. I find out what a blood vessel is, for example. I find out that I don't know what blood is, so I find out what blood is. I find out that there are white blood cells and red blood cells. I go all the way down, like a tree's roots, until I can understand what the word "heart" means, what that subject is.

That's the way that I took Sudbury and traditional school and put them together. I say, "OK, you tell me what I have to study so that I don't go and look a blades of grass all day, because I will (laughs)! Tell me to learn about some particular thing and I'll go and learn about it. Then I'll get back to you by the end of the week so that you can give me something else." But I can't have you tell me what to learn, because if I'm stuck thinking about something over there, then I can't learn more over here.

I've got a love/hate relationship with math. I love it when I can sit down and do it and understand it. I hate it when someone is trying to teach me and I'm not understanding what they're saying.

LS:

How about when you're trying to understand something on your own and you can't understand it?

SP:

Then I usually close the book, walk away, turn around, walk back, open the book and try again (laughs)! That's what I've been doing teaching myself pre-algebra. I'm saying to myself, "I don't want to sit in a classroom and learn this material one chapter at a time!" So I said to myself, "I'm going to finish this in two weeks." I sat down and I've been doing 5 chapters a day. I'm trying to finish this one book and I've 12 days left. I need to catch up (laughs)!

If I can do this, then I can do algebra by the end of this year, and then I'll be ready for Algebra-2 for 12th grade. The other idea is taking community college evening classes in basic algebra so I can catch up, and intermediate algebra over the summer. Math is an issue for me right now. I don't care about anything else. I can understand the science, I'm good at writing, I learned those naturally.

Math is the one place where I feel like Sudbury betrayed me, and traditional school is just making me mad.

LS:

How do you feel like you're progressing?

SP:

It depends on the day of the week. It's hard — it's always hard — but not hard because the material's hard. It's hard because I have to sit down and do it. I'm an ideas person. I'm not the one who does something with the ideas. I come up with the ideas, then you do it.



I once found a math book that I could understand and I fell so much in love with it that I was in tears by the end of the week, because I understood! It was “The Algebra Survival Guide”. It’s in the Sudbury library but it’s falling apart because I had it out from the library for 7 months (laughs)!

I can’t understand the numbers — I need a calculator — and it’s not like I didn’t drill on the multiplication tables since I was in 3rd grade. Even doing the flash cards and stuff, I’m just not a doing-the-multiplication-tables kind of person.

I think what I’m going to find when I start learning algebra is that all of my number problems will disappear. People who are good at math because they understand the numbers go to algebra and find they suck. I did the math, I could do the math, I just wasn’t good with the numbers. I feel like when I go to algebra, because my mind is set up a different way, maybe it will click. That’s my hope!

LS:

You mean you do badly when you have to solve a problem?

SP:

Right, but I can tell you how to solve the problem. I could tell you how to set up the problem and then say, “now you do the math. You add the numbers.”

What happens in school is that they throw something at you, it dangles in space, and they say, “now I want you to stand here and throw stuff at this subject until it makes sense.” They just keep adding stuff onto that glowing orb until, all of a sudden, you just understand because there’s just so many things attached to the same area.

I’m just now understanding the idea of biology being different than ecology, or geology, or geography. All these different things, they just didn’t make sense before. I just thought, “science, frogs and rocks: they can go over there.” Now I understand that the study of what’s inside a frog is different than then study of rocks or the study of mixing things together and having big explosions happen (laughs)! That’s a part of school I never got.

I found that what I need is a teacher to say, “Chapter 1: cells. Lesson A: the nucleus. Then within that whatever, whatever, whatever... any information they want to have about the nucleus. For me to understand stuff it has to be written flat out or. If they say, “We’re going to look at things in this woods...” OK, then go (laughs)! We’ll come back and talk about it later.

LS:

It sounds like your talking about context: things and how they relate to each other. They need to have relations or...

SP:

... it just doesn’t click.

LS:



What have you done that you think was really successful. What would you tell other kids to do or not to do?

SP:

Hmmm. I guess it really depends on the kid. I feel that one of my greatest achievements was something I said to my Mom. I said to her, "Mom, Sudbury broke my mind. I'm a free thinker now. Look at me, I'm a free thinker! And she said, "yes, so?" And I said, "exactly!"

I don't have to go to school. I feel that I can learn more outside of school. I feel that I can follow through with my thoughts and line my life up. And guess what? My friend at the Bruderhof, she wouldn't be able to do any of that because she can only do what's in the textbook. She can't learn what's outside of the textbook.

You could give me a subject and I could go on-line and I'd come back to you an hour and say this what I've learned, this is what's important. I'm not very good at taking notes from what someone else is saying, but Sudbury gave me the freedom of being able to pick and choose what I need, what I want to learn, putting it all together. I think that's what lots of kids don't have.

LS:

How did they do that, or how did you do that, or what did that?

SP:

I'd say things like, "I want to know about this. I don't know anything about that. Well, where can I find out about it? The library!" OK I'll go to the library, or I'll go on the internet (laughs)! Really you should learn to research at the library, which I need to do next.

People say, "I can't get Google to give me the right results." That's the first thing I learned: if I want to know something particular, then find out how Google will give me the right results. And I learned that, and now I can find things on Google faster than most people.

LS:

But what came first? It's kind of a chicken and the egg problem because first you had to have and interest before you went out to look for other interesting things. How did you develop your interest? There are a lot of kids in Sudbury who don't seem to have interest and they just play video games all day.

SP:

I didn't have interest until I left Sudbury, which is kind of weird because I'd say, "I'm bored, there's nothing to do here. I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored." Then I got home and immediately it kicked into overdrive. I got interested in solar energy, sustainable living techniques, farming, agriculture, other woodsy survival stuff. I got involved in dog training, search and rescue, service dogs, and police work for no apparent reason other than they have horses (laughs)!

I was actually listing off all the career choices to a friend on-line and he went, "EMT! I thought you wanted to be a veterinarian!"

Well, I was like, "I either want to be an EMT, or a police officer with a canine unit, or a mounted police officer on a horse, or a search and rescue unit, or a park ranger, or a nurse, or a midwife,



or a paramedic, or a psychiatrist, or — the list just kept going on and on — or a farmer, or a bum (laughs). Those are all interests! And depending on my mood I read about how people make food with wind power, or how to pick locks. Too many interests — now I'm getting into computer science.

LS:

How do you prevent yourself from getting swept away from the field you're looking at before you can finish looking at it?

SP:

That's the thing with dissection. It has a tendency to pull you out, which is how I've gotten so many interests, and how they've all tied themselves together.

LS:

So you do put your foot down occasionally?

SP:

I don't really put my foot down because I'm not really good at that. If I have an interest I'll start reading about it and all of a sudden I get pulled somewhere else. Eventually I have 12 interests, but that means I can pick and choose on a daily basis. "Oh, I want to go research something. OK, I'm interested in this..." I pick it up, do a certain amount of research, and then it carries me away again. And sometimes I get tired of something, and I'll do something like say to myself, "I want to learn about flying," and I'll get into paragliding or something like that. I've gotten interested in scuba diving... it's hard to stay focused when you've got too many interests.

LS:

Do you feel that you're succeeding, or that you will succeed?

SP:

I feel that the interests I've got now are just a landing pad. I might follow any one of these interests somewhere else, but right now they are creating my space. These are my interests, these are my areas of interests. I'm interested in health sciences, I'm interested in activism, I'm interested in the environment.

LS:

And you think you'll stay in those areas?

SP:

It's the hope (laughs)!

LS:

If could imagine where you'll be in five years, even if it's just a fantasy, where would you like to be, and what would you like to have happen by that time?

SP:



In 5 years I'd like to be shooting for my first year of vet school. If all works out, if I get accepted, if I get my prerequisite classes done, ... and if I'm still alive (laughs)! That's where I'm hoping to be... or in China. China would be fun.

Even though I've got many interests — and I do contemplate other career tracks — the vet idea is the one thing that I'm dead set on. Eight years now, eight years.

My biggest issue with the world is trying to understand how it can be that when you meet someone and you ask, "what are your interests?" and they go, "I don't have any." That's my biggest issue: how could somebody not have any interests! And the problem is that three years ago I was one of those people.

When I was at Sudbury I would sit there going, "oh, there's a black spot on a white wall." I'm staring at the white wall because there's nothing else to do. There were things to do, but I was too lazy to do them. I didn't have any interests other than animals. That was pretty forward, cut and dry, if it has hair I like it, if it has scales I like it, if it has slime I like it, ... but if it's a person I don't like it (laughs). Those were my interests.

LS:

What happened there? You're making a distinction and I'm not seeing all the implications. You had interests: animals, but these are not the same kind of interests you have now, which are something more than just interests. What is the difference between the interests you had three years ago and now?

SP:

It came with the realization that I could actually get something that I wanted. That I could actually learn something. "Oh, you can sit down and you can read this book and you can learn it, learn what's inside." When before I thought you needed a teacher to teach you everything.

When I got to Sudbury I thought, "I can't learn anything because there are no teachers here, and I need a teacher to teach me everything." I still feel that I need a teacher to teach me things. I'm not going to try to scuba dive without having professional instruction because that's stupid and illegal.

I think what needs to happen is that the public system and the private schools needs to come to a decision that isn't this extreme or that extreme, it's a middle ground which some call experimental education.

I just got my fingers on the book "The Teenage Liberation Handbook", *after* I got out of Sudbury, which is the biggest mistake I ever made because that book changed my mind completely.

What I need now is the book that says what you do in the last 6 months when you notice that you haven't done anything to get you into college for the last 4 years but you need something that looks good. That's the book I need (laughs)!