

## What Schools Could Learn from Skateboarding

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One of my students in a university course I instructed last semester, a young man of around twenty, brought his skateboard with him to classes. He carried it under his arm as he came in the door and took his seat and it sat prominently on the floor in front of his desk during the class hour. At the end of class, the skateboard went back under his arm and he and it proceeded out the door. I spoke with the skateboarding student several times and was taken by his personal attachment to skateboarding and his commitment to get as good as he could with it. For him, it was much more than a way to get from here to there. It was no less that a part of who he was, his identity, and it gave him pleasure and personal satisfaction.

During those weeks, I found myself drawn to observing skateboarders during my lunch hours while sitting on benches on campus and a nearby park munching on a sandwich and a Macintosh apple and drinking a Diet Coke. The skateboarders were never alone; they were invariably with one or a two others who seemed as serious about the activity and they were. They didn't talk much at all, just some clipped phrases. They appeared lost in the activity, consumed by it, oblivious of the world around them. And they seemed committed to improving their skateboarding skills. They'd try a maneuver—spinning into the air from the top of a flight of stairs or something of the sort—more than a few times falling scary hard, but they'd tenaciously stay with it until they mastered it. They look to me to be having a good time.

This writing isn't about skateboarding but rather education. I've pondered how what I was hearing and seeing with regard to skateboarding informs the way formal schooling goes on and could go on. These next pages outline what has resulted from it. To get my points across, I'll set out two imagined scenarios to create what

I hope is a revealing contrast. The protagonist in both scenarios is a sixteen-year-old junior in high school I'll call John, an avid skateboarder. While John and his circumstances are imagined, they are based on my experiences with high school and university students and classrooms in my work. The first scenario is John in a skateboarding outing, and the second is John in a math class in high school.

*Scenario one.*

It's 4:00 on a Thursday on a crisp, sunny day in May. Newly bloomed lilacs sprinkle blue into the green landscape painting. A sailing frisbee about to be chomped by a dog stretched out like Superman and having the time of his life. Center right in this painting is John and his compatriot for the day Tom and their skateboards next to a building, part of an arboretum, a botanical garden, at the edge of the park with stairs and landings and ramps and pathways —perfect for skateboarding.

As if by the click of a pause button the scene comes alive. The dog snatches the frisbee and comes lightly back to earth and trots, not too fast, he seems to be taking his time, back to his playing partner, a young woman in her early thirties I'd say. John and Tom go into action.

What can we say about John's engagement with this skateboarding activity?

He really likes to skateboard. Skateboarding is true to his nature, and he's good at it.

He feels comfortable in the park setting. It's a good place for him to be.

In his eyes, this occasion is about him. It grew out of his purposes, his goals. He is in charge of it. He wanted to skateboard at 4:00 that Thursday, and he set it up, and he looked forward to it. This activity will end whenever he chooses to end it, whenever he thinks and feels it is completed.

He invited Tom to be with him that day because Tom is a good person to be around. But more than that, and most important, Tom loves skateboarding as much as he does. Tom's interest in skateboarding and respect for it and commitment inspire him. Tom's example and the suggestions he unobtrusively offers help him get better at his skateboarding.

For John, this time at the park is just about skateboarding and companionship and isn't mixed in, cluttered up, with some other agenda. For instance, it isn't about learning, or furthering, or giving testimony to a political ideology or social cause or being a better person. It's a time to skateboard and have a good time and a productive time, nothing more than that, nothing less than that.

In a very important way, John isn't at the park alone, or just with Tom. He is accompanied in this undertaking by, whatever the best term for it, a cohort, or tribe, or community, or reference group, or culture—the world of skateboarding. John is a member, a citizen, of that world, and he feels good about that. It makes him feel secure, valid, he belongs to something. He's part of something bigger than just himself: he's a skateboarder. In John's eyes, this gives meaning and significance, weight, importance, to this activity. It is about Skateboarding, not just skateboarding.

John wants to be a respected citizen, as it were, in the world of skateboarding. Part of that, this is a time to improve his skateboarding skills. He knows how good the very best skateboarders are—he sees them on YouTube, he goes to exhibitions and competitions, and when he can, he makes personal contact with top-rank skateboarders. They best embody, epitomize, the finest in the culture of skateboarding, its values, its ways. They are his role models, his heroes, the ones he wants to emulate the best he can. They are his standard. The best he can, he wants to approximate the exemplary excellence and commitment the very best skateboarders exemplify. He knows how good he is now at skateboarding, and he notes, and feels good about, even the smallest increment of increased skateboarding capability and accomplishment in this direction.

When the Thursday skateboarding is completed, John is sore—ouch with some of the falls—and tired, a hot bath and nap is in order, but it's been a good time with Tom and he feels gratified and proud of what he accomplished that day, and he looks forward to setting up a next skateboarding outing with Tom or other of his skateboarding compatriots.

So that's scenario one. The point in this context is that everything on this list had a positive effect on John's commitment and accomplishment: The activity suited him and he was good at it. The setting was good. The occasion was about him and he was in charge of it. He was with a good companion. He felt part of something larger than himself. He was goal directed, purposeful. He was guided by the highest standards. He was aware of even the smallest advances beyond his current personal frontier of accomplishment. It was a good time for him, rewarding, fruitful, satisfying; he felt good about himself when it was over.

*Scenario two.*

John's math class in room 160 at Wilson High School, 2:10 on a Thursday afternoon. What can we say about John's involvement in this math class?

John doesn't like math very much at all. Doing math isn't true to his nature, and he isn't good at it. He finds it "over there," alien to him, and boring. Doing math doesn't build him up; it brings him down

He's doesn't find this classroom a good place to be—the color of the walls, the rows of desks, the blackboard, the poster of the Swiss Alps that for whatever reason is tacked onto the bulletin board. If he were to do math, it wouldn't be here.

This occasion isn't about him in his eyes. It's about the math class and the teacher. He's a student in Mr. Smith's math course.

John's not in charge of this activity, the teacher is. This class session didn't grow out of John's goals for the day but rather the

teacher's. The teacher has planned the hour—he drew up a lesson plan and is executing it. John's job is to do what the teacher tells him to do. John didn't pick the time for this class to start. It started at 2:10 because that's how the school set up the schedule. And it won't end when it feels completed to John. It will end at 2:55, because that's what is in the schedule.

John doesn't have control of who he is with this day. The school assigned the teacher, as well as the other students. The teacher doesn't strike him as being someone to admire or emulate. The other students in the class aren't his people, and they don't inspire him or help him in math. In fact, a lot of them have no respect at all for math or any interest in it.

The math class isn't focused just on math. It's also about being the right kind of person as those in power over John define it. The school has made a commitment to the ideologies, ideals, of egalitarianism and diversity and social justice, and pursues that agenda in everything it does, including math classes, emphasizing mixed or heterogeneous, classes, group projects, inserting messages about racial and gender matters and homophobia, and so on. Not that John would use words like egalitarianism and diversity and social justice, but he picks up its practices and messages. This divides, diffuses, scatters, disperses, John's energies.

John is not part of, call it, the culture of math, the world of math, anything like that. Here, it is just the people in the room: this teacher, and these students, and this textbook, these assignments. He's not trying to be a respected member of any group. He has no math wizards as his role models or heroes. In fact, he couldn't name a top rank mathematician to save his life. This is just a required math class at Wilson High and the teacher is pretty good guy and talks sports with the boys.

Beyond getting to class on time, John had no purposes of his own to direct him this hour. He couldn't tell you with any exactness where his is in math, what he can do and can't do and where he needs to improve. He isn't on his own case, as it were,

as he is with his skateboarding. He does his best on the quizzes and tests the teacher administers, but he has no particular understanding of how far he's come in math. Since he isn't self-conscious, self-aware, in math as he is in skateboarding, he isn't vigilant to his incremental improvements in math and thus doesn't celebrate them when they occur. If he did, he'd like math better than he does. Success motivates, even small successes.

When the class is over, beyond a feeling of relief, now I can leave—he was clock-watching the whole way through and particularly the last ten minutes—John has no sense of accomplishment or satisfaction. In fact, while he isn't articulate about it, doesn't put words to it, he feels a bit lessened, compromised, deadened, by the experience. He certainly isn't waiting with eager anticipation for tomorrow's class. But at least tomorrow's class, Friday's, will be the last one in the week and he'll have a couple days off before he has to start in again on Monday.

So that is scenario two. Right down the line, it wasn't good for John's motivation and achievement in math. And more, it wasn't good for promoting, the term educators use, lifelong learning—that is to say, that John would continue with math as an adult. To the contrary, John's experience in that course promoted a lifetime indifference if not aversion to math. And a sobering point: John's is not an atypical case. There are many, many Johns, and Megans, in math classes learning, more than anything, to turn off to math, and, if they can help it, never have anything to do with it again once they escape from school.

So what can be done this circumstance? Here are some suggestions:

*Make the familiar strange.*

One of the problems thinking about schooling is that we have all had so much experience with it; it's so familiar to us. We started school at five, or even younger, and spent all day, every day, with summers off, for thirteen years (K-12), seventeen years (university undergraduate), or eighteen or twenty or even more years (masters degree, doctorate). We've shown up to a class and sat in a desk and listened to the teacher and did what he/she said and did the assignments and turned in the homework and took the tests and got a grade, and, well, that's what school is, it just is.

It helps to see school as a workplace like any other workplace, a context where people—in this case, teachers and students—get some work done. When it is viewed as a workplace, like IBM or the post office or Aetna insurance, the way schools do business moves from being a given to arbitrary, one way among many to operate, and, compared to other work settings, a workplace that operates in funny ways. In every work place I can think of, you don't show up every day with your fellow employees and sit there waiting for a supervisor to tell you exactly what to do (and these supervisors are not necessarily licensed by the government), and then after an hour go sit somewhere else for another supervisor to tell you what to do, and do that all day, and then go home and do night work these supervisors told you to do (schools call it homework), and then repeat that process, day after day and day, month after month after month, with summers off, year and year after year.

Rather, you come to work at 9:00 or whenever it is, and you know what your job is and you do it. A supervisor might stick his head in the door and ask how it's going, and you might check in with a supervisor every so often, or regularly, and you might go through some training either at the beginning of your employment and periodically thereafter. Most jobs I can think of end at the end of a normal workday; the rest of the time is yours. You might do some extra work in the evenings and on the weekends, but it isn't an inherent aspect of the job. And on most jobs you have

vacations, but you don't automatically shut down for the whole summer.

School people not only control, minute to minute, children's work day, they also feel they have every right to control their lives from morning to bedtime. Schools have children—I'm thinking of elementary and secondary schools--from 8:30 to 3:00 Monday through Friday, which is a lot of time. Yet that's not enough time for them; they pile on work at night. I have a daughter in grade school and there she is doing assigned math at 8:00 at night while I'm watching a DVD. We are so conditioned to things being that way, we don't question it. And we should question it.

But in order to do that, we need to see schools with new eyes; make the familiar strange. To get a handle on schools and how they might be changed we need gain an anthropological or sociological perspective on them, as the way this particular culture has thought and acted with reference to schooling, as one way of doing things among many. Schools are workplaces. If work goes on effectively under some arrangement in any workplace, anywhere, it should be considered as a way to operate in the school workplace.

*Make the individual student the focus in schooling.*

In school matters, we shine the light on what the teacher is doing; the curriculum of the school (the subjects, the content), including whether it should be uniform from school to school, mandated by the state or a national curriculum; we measure how schools are performing, and how groups of students are doing--American students versus students from other countries, rich versus poor, whites versus minorities, boys versus girls; we attend to how much money is going to schools; we look at how schools serve a social agenda or cause (racial harmony and equality, diversity, and so forth).

There's nothing inherently wrong with any of that, but we need to keep in mind that when it comes down to it, students go to



school one at a time. When Johnny or Megan go off to school in the morning with their backpacks on, it's just them. What comes out of that process depends on that that particular student in like as a unique human being: his or her nature, capabilities, interests, personal qualities, predilections, and actions. Students are not interchangeable parts. They differ in every way imaginable, every one of them is one-of-a-kind, and we need to keep that fact in mind; and in my view, we need to keep it uppermost in mind. When we think of schools, we need to imagine in our minds an individual person doing something and getting something done. Of course his or her context matters, but that context is an aspect of that particular human being's life. Life is lived—yours, mine, every child's—one at a time, and the results that person achieves is a one-of-a-kind outcome.

*See schooling as something an individual student does now.*

With schools, we look at what the teacher does, what the class is doing, and what the schools are doing, and what categories of students are doing (blacks and whites, boys and girls, rich and poor), and what the politicians are doing. Again, that's fine, I'm not saying discard those perspective. I'm offering that schooling comes down to what a particular student is doing--and not in general, not this week or this month, not today, but rather *right now*. What is this student thinking and doing right now and why and what is resulting from it? Make sense of that and you go a long way toward understanding, and improving, schooling.

Another way to say it: *the individual student is the key, focal, most salient, worker in the school*. The jobs of others in his/her life—teachers, school administrators, school board people, politicians, and so crucially important, parents—is to help this student do his or her job better. In my work as a professor, I spent a great deal of my time observing classes. Increasingly, instead of attending to what the teacher was doing or what was happening in the class, I would look at a particular student and ask myself:

What is on this student's mind right now? What is the meaning of this moment in time to this student? What is this student doing right now? What is this student getting done right now? And if I wasn't sure of the answers to those questions—which was invariably the case—I asked myself how might I go about informing myself about them?

All to say, school is a place where a student does (or doesn't do) some work right now.

*Take the advice of Robert Henri.*

Earlier today, I put some lyrics of a patriotic song I remember from my childhood that I don't hear anymore in this time: "My country tis of thee/ Sweet land of liberty." American students aren't clay or lab animals to be shaped or conditioned into anyone's favored personal, political, or ideological vision, or to enlisted into serving anyone else's interest or cause. Quit ordering them around. Give them the richest and most varied array opportunities as you can and encourage them to become the best possible version of the unique human being they are (and if they don't take you up on that, respect that call), but quit telling them what to think and how to be.

Back in 2008, I wrote an article for this site called "Robert Henri on Education. Robert Henri (1865-1929) was an American painter and educator. He was very prominent in his time, including being designated by the Arts Council of New York as one of the top three living American artists, but nobody remembers his now.

Here, I'll repeat some advice that Henri offered about education and the role of the teacher I reported in that article. It says much better than I can what I think ought to go on in American schools. Henri on education:

Life is being wasted. Human beings are not having half the fun that is their due, not making the beautiful things they could make, and each one is not the good news to the others he might

be; and that is because we are educated off our natural track. We need another form of education.

We are all different. We are all to see a different life and do different things. Education is self-product, a matter of asking questions and getting the best answers we can get. We read a book, a novel, any book, and we are interested in it to the degree that we find in it answers to our questions.

The school is not a place where students are fitted into the groove of rule and regulation, but rather where personality and originality of vision are encouraged.

Different men must learn different things. Each man must put himself as far as possible in the way of knowing what is known, and he must make choices. Everything is his to use or leave. The school is a place of strengths and weaknesses. There is all sorts of advice, good and bad; and there is advice that will serve one and not another.

The question of development of the art spirit in all walks of life interests me. I mean by this, the development of individual judgment and taste, the love of work for the sake of doing things well, and the tendency toward simplicity and order. If anything can be done to bring the public to a greater consciousness of the relationship between art and life, of the part each person plays by exercising and developing his own personal taste and judgment and not depending on outside authority, it would be well.

No matter how fine a school you are in, you have to educate yourself.

An artist must educate himself. He cannot be educated. He must test things out as they apply to himself. His life is one long investigation of things and his own reactions to them.

The best advice I have ever given students who have studied under me has been this: "Educate yourself, do not let me educate you—use me, do not be used by me."

By my teaching I hope to inspire you to personal activity and to present your vision.

Men either get to know what they want and go after it, or some other persons tell them what they want and drive them after it.

Few people ever mention that they have studied under themselves. Their attitude is, "Here I am, a student, a ball of putty, roll me."

The self-educator judges his own course. He judges advice to him. He judges the evidence presented him. He judges himself. He realizes he is no longer an infant. He is already a man; his own mature development is already in process.

Find out what you really like if you can. Find out what is really important to you. And then sing your song. You will have something to sing about, and your whole heart will be in the singing.

We haven't arrived yet, and it is foolish to believe that we have. The world is not done. Evolution is not complete

Our education has led away from the realization that the mystery of nature is in each man. When we are wiser we not assume to mold them, but will watch their development. And we will learn from them. This habit of conducting nature is a bad one.

It seems to me that before a man tries to express anything to the world, he must recognize in himself an individual, a new one, very distinct from others.

I do not want to see how skillful you are. What is life to you? What reasons and principles have you found? What are your deductions? What projections have you made? What excitement, what pleasure, do you get out of life?

I should like to see every encouragement for those who are fighting to open new ways, every living worker helped to do what he believes in, the best he can.

If you want to be useful, if you want to be an encouragement to the deserving young artist, become interested in his effort and have keen willingness to accept the surprises of its outcome.

The minute we shut people up we are proving our distrust in them. If we believe in them we give them freedom, and through freedom they accomplish. We harness up the horse and destroy his very race instincts. When we want a thrill for our souls we watch the flight of an eagle. It is better that every thought be uttered freely, fearlessly, than be denied utterance for fear of evil. It is only through complete independence that all goodness can be spoken, all purity can be found.

Each man must seek for himself the people who hold the essential beauty. Each man must eventually say to himself, "These are my people."

When a man is full up with what he is talking about he handles language with mastery unusual to him; and it is at such times that he learns language.

Self-acquaintance is a rare condition.

It is a big job to know oneself; no one can ever entirely accomplish it. But to try is to act in the line of evolution. Men can come to know more of themselves, and act more like themselves, and this will be by dint of self-acknowledgment. The only men who are interesting to themselves and to others are those who have been willing to meet themselves squarely. Today man stands in his own way. He puts externally imposed criteria in the way of his own revelation and development. He should push the restraining hands off himself; he should defy fashion and let himself be.

Of course it is not easy to go one's road. Because of our education we continually get off track. But the fight is a good one, and there is joy in it.

A good school offers itself up to the student to be used by him in building himself into a force that will be of stimulating value to the world. The student uses the school, its facilities, its

instruction. The instructors are back of him, interested, watching, encouraging, as ready to learn from him as to teach him. They are anxious for his evidence. They recognize him as a man—another force, a new force. They give him the use of their knowledge and experience. Their only demand is that he work both body and mind to the limit of his endurance to find in himself whatever there is of value; that he find his truest thoughts and the simplest, straightest, fittest means of making a record of them. The goal is that the student becomes the deepest thinker, the kindest appreciator, the clearest and simplest, frankest creator he can be today. Mastering today is the most dependable evidence that the student will master tomorrow and next year and the year following. If the student has dignity, worth, integrity, and courage in his thought and action today, he is worthy of the name student in its finest meaning.

*Make schooling more like skateboarding.*

To the extent we can, we ought to replicate in classrooms the aspects that make skateboarding such a compelling and productive activity for its participants. Go back to scenario one and read down the list. How could this happen in school? My daughter plays golf this way. She likes it and is good at it. She's doing it; it's not being done to her. She knows how good she is now and is pushing herself hard and going beyond her current level of achievement and feeling good about it, and she can't wait to get back to the driving range and the golf course. She knows who Lydia Ko is (a great woman golfer) and she identifies with her and sees her as a standard and inspiration. She uses coaches; they don't use her.

Her math class in school isn't like this. She's managing a 3 or 3+ in the class (up to the school's standard, which is low), and even though her math teacher is nice, there are on things she would much rather do than be in math class; and tired, it's been a very long day, completing tonight's math homework assignment is an unwelcome chore. The irony is that real life mathematicians (or scientists or artists or businesspeople or chefs, you name it) do

math in the same way that skateboarders do skateboarding. They feel an affinity to it, they integrate work and play--it's both hard work and a good time--they find some friends/colleagues that inspire them and assist them, they note and celebrate every achievement, they don't wait for someone to tell them what to do next, and on down the list. They *do* math, they don't just take a class in it, and that makes all the difference in the world.

What's so unfortunate is that the school people, including her teacher, think my daughter is learning important things in math—in fact, she is learning this and that and nothing goes together for her and none of it matters to her—and that she is learning to like math and will want to continue in that subject—just the opposite. The politicians see standardized test scores in math go up and feel good about their school accountability mandates, but none of them know what is going on with my daughter or any other individual child. They see students in the aggregate, but they don't see actual children.

I think that's where we need to start. Wherever we are, whatever our place in the scheme of things (parent, teacher, school administrator, journalist, academic, politician), find a child, just one, and see--and understand and respect and cherish--that human being. And then take it from there.