

Unschooling

By David P. Byers Ph.D.

An Excerpt from Homeschooling in High School for Higher Education by David P. Byers Ph.D.

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One method of planning homeschool curricula is to not plan at all, but to go with your child's natural inclinations, current interests, and family hobbies, habits, and traditions. Although my description does not do it justice, this method is sometimes referred to as unschooling.

I'll have to admit that when I first heard of unschooling, I did not have a positive opinion of it—at least for our homeschool program. However, unschooling does have a certain appeal to me now, but I honestly think that it takes much more with regard to the parent's teaching ability and the child's learning ability to “unschool” than to “homeschool”. Let me give you an example.

Several years ago, a friend of mine was teaching college-level classes in philosophy. Rather than construct lesson plans and develop traditional writing assignments, he decided that he wanted his students to read the materials and spend each class period engaging in discussion and debate for three hours a week about whatever topic about philosophy that came up. As the instructor, he had to be prepared for *whatever* topics came up that were of interest to his students so that he could respond to them, direct the debates/discussions, and refer them to additional resources if need be. He spent days reading and preparing himself for *every* class period!

The unschooling child really has to be a skilled, self-directed learner and the unschooling parent has to be a skilled facilitator to help the child gain access to materials, define the scope of the learning while it happens, and determining when it is time to move on in the learning process. I also think that unschooling tends to make one ask the question, “How do you know what the child spent time learning is going to help in the big scheme of his/her entire education?”

The unschooling method is also very difficult to account for when you complete your yearly exemption requests for the state, as well as when you turn in transcripts when applying for admission to college. It can be done, but it's much more difficult to do so.

If you buy textbooks from Bob Jones, A Beka, or any of the other major homeschool groups, you are most likely using a version of a method called scope and sequence. Most traditional school systems use this method as well because it chops up each subject into neat little bites that can be taught and hopefully learned during the course

of 9-12 months. Many homeschoolers use this method or a variation of it because it's what most of us grew up with—we are comfortable with it.

The scope and sequence method is certainly easy to account for with the Nebraska Department of Education. If you use one of the major dealers, you only have to put down their name—like A Beka—on the form rather than having to explain what you are planning to teach for each subject during the year!

The scope and sequence method works very well for most rookie homeschoolers. For experienced home educators, the method may tend to be limiting and as a result, they often “supplement” their child's learning experiences with a more eclectic or mixed approach.

A variation of the scope/sequence approach was developed a number of years ago by E.D. Hirsch, Jr. who created what he referred to as a core knowledge program. Hirsch believed that children, particularly in the United States, should acquire certain “pieces” of knowledge at each grade level. The pieces of knowledge, he felt, should be focused on topics, themes, and skills that are (or should be) common to our culture in the U.S. In theory, when our children grow up with this common knowledge, they have a similar frame of reference from which to continue learning as they develop into adults.

Hirsch's associates produced a series of books for each grade level K-6 with the core knowledge series. There are even schools that use his approach. Although Hirsch's theory provides a certain fascination for me, I can't say that I subscribe to it. I do find his books to be an excellent resource for planning lessons, determining scope/sequence, and even for my children to read.

Whether parents use Hirsch's method or other scope/sequence curricula, the approach to teaching and learning can be comforting to refer to when relatives, friends, or complete strangers ask them to explain what their children are learning at home. This is especially true when our children are in grade school, but when they reach high school and are studying advanced subjects, we may not feel so certain about our abilities to really define what our children are learning—no matter what method we use. Happy learning!

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