

**Review of “*I Won’t Learn from You*” by Herbert Kohl
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Should all high school students have to take a foreign language? Which is the best method for teaching reading to young children? Should we institute a national curriculum?

Many people thinking about education consider such questions crucial, as though once we agree on what to teach and how to teach it, the rest will take care of itself. Because these questions are by no means easy, the debate they engender can take up so much energy that educational reformers forget that there are issues deeper, more central, than these. One of the most central and overlooked ideas is this: Teaching does not automatically produce learning. Even if we could agree to *teach* Johnny a foreign language (or computer programming or critical thinking or anything else), that would be no guarantee that Johnny would *learn* a foreign language.

Herbert Kohl is one of the few educational reformers who realizes this. His *I Won’t Learn from You* recognizes “the essential role that will and free choice play in learning,” and there is more insight in these few pages than in many longer works.

Teachers can teach, but students are only going to turn that teaching into learning if they choose to and see good reason to. Sometimes they have very good reasons *not* to, and this is the subject of Kohl’s essay. The stories he tells are about students who refuse to learn what is in the school curriculum because “not-learning” protects their cultural identity, or personal autonomy, or sense of dignity, or all three.

The crucial distinction Kohl asks us to make is between *can’t* and *won’t*. Teachers and school officials usually assume that a child who doesn’t learn is unable to, but Kohl maintains that children often *decide* not to learn particular subjects, or from particular people, or in particular settings. He writes, “I have encountered willed not-learning throughout my thirty years of teaching and believe that such not-learning is often and disastrously mistaken for failure to learn or inability to learn.”

Why do some young people choose not to learn? Many of Kohl’s stories are about young people refusing to learn the racist or sexist attitudes of their school’s curriculum. He describes a visit to a class of Latino students during which the students objected to the fact that their history textbook completely ignored *their* history. Kohl surprised these students by agreeing with them.

As they talked, he says, “The class launched into a serious and sophisticated discussion of the ways racism manifested itself in their everyday lives at school. And they described the stance they took in order to resist that racism and yet not be thrown out of school. It amounted to nothing less than full-blown, cooperative not-learning. They accepted the failing grades not-learning produced in exchanged for the passive defense of their personal and cultural integrity.” Kohl admires these students for their ability to see what is wrong and their refusal to support it, even at what might be some cost to

themselves. He writes, “This was a class of school failures, and perhaps, I believed then and still believe, the repository of the leadership and intelligence of their generation.”

Some students decide not to learn because of their objections to the content of what is being taught; others object to the assumptions school makes and to the way students in it are treated. Kohl describes Rick, a student who worked as hard at *not* learning algebra as some students work to learn it. Because Rick suspected he might genuinely be interested in algebra, he devised ways of tricking himself into seeing the equations on the page as meaningless strings of symbols. Why would a student do this?

“There were emotional reasons Rick refused to learn algebra,” Kohl tells us, “but it’s essential to distinguish here between his decision to not-learn algebra and his ability to learn it. Rick could have learned algebra quite easily. There was nothing wrong with his mind, his ability to concentrate, or his ability to deal with abstract ideas. He could read, and did read books he chose. He knew how to do very complex building projects and science projects. He enjoyed playing around with athletic statistics and gambling odds. He just rejected the whole idea of being tested and measured against other students and, though he was forced to attend school, there was no way to force him to learn.”

Schools have an easier time knowing what to do about students who appear unable to learn than about those who are unwilling to. For the former, there are at least remedial classes, tutors, specialists. Students who deliberately refuse school, or some part of it, confound the experts. Why would Rick go to such lengths to avoid learning something that he thought he might like? Many would argue that such actions hurt or deprive only the student engaging in them. But Kohl asks us to see these behaviors as the acts of people who feel they have no other recourse, no other way of asserting their objections to what goes on in school or of preserving their integrity.

“Since students have no way to legitimately criticize the schooling they are subjected to or the people they are required to learn from,” he writes, “resistance and rebellion are stigmatized.” Yet such refusals are so attractive to students who practice them precisely because they confound the experts and thereby put the refusers out of reach of the school system and its traditional cures.

While some students say, “I won’t learn” – from a particular teacher or about a particular subject – others say, in effect, “I may learn it, but I won’t let you know that I’ve learned it.”

Recently, a young friend of mine told me about a boy in the seventh grade who had his teachers thoroughly confused. Apparently this boy spent the year not paying attention in science class, fooling around, making trouble. He didn’t do the assignments and left tests blank. He was on the verge of failing the class when the final exam was given. This time, however, the boy filled in the answers and ended up receiving the highest grade in the class. The teacher was amazed. She assumed he had cheated and demanded that he take the test again in the principal’s office, with both principal and teacher watching.

He did. The results were the same, and the adults were mystified. How could a child who had never been able to do the work suddenly perform so well? His classmate, who was telling the story, wasn't mystified at all.

"Of course he was smart all along," she said, "but he just didn't want to do the work because he thought it was dumb the way they were teaching it, and he didn't like the way the teacher treated kids."

This student hadn't kept himself from learning science, but he had retained control over when he demonstrated that knowledge. Clearly, his teachers were not prepared for this. It was much more familiar, and far less challenging, to believe that he had been unable to do well in science class than to believe that he had chosen not to.

A companion to Kohl's book is Daniel Fader's *The Naked Children*, which came out in 1971 and isn't much talked about, though it ought to be remembered as much as any classic school reform book from that period. Fader's is an account of the year he spent in an inner-city junior high school in Washington, D.C., supervising an experimental program. The real story, however, is Fader's friendship with a group of five students who became his defenders and informants. He learns more from them than any program could have taught him about the students and their lives. They, in turn, see to it that his program is carried out and are quick to let Fader know when teachers violate its intents.

One of Fader's most compelling stories concerns Wentworth, one of the students in the group, whose teacher reports him to be illiterate. Fader, observing Wentworth in class during his first day at the school, catches him reading a magazine surreptitiously and later calls him on this. After some prodding on Fader's part, Wentworth finally explains: " 'Sure I can read,' he said. 'I been able to read ever since I can remember. But I ain't never gonna let *them* know, on account of iff'n I do I'm gonna have to read all that crap they got.' As a student in a school that neither respected nor understood him, Wentworth knew what was better for him when he feigned illiteracy as his protection against the indignities of school."

Fader, like Kohl, emphasizes that while children's not-learning or not-understanding strategies may appear self-defeating, these children are in fact making a reasonable and self-protecting choice, given the realities of the environment in which they are forced to spend time.

One could argue that a child who spends so much of his time and energy figuring out how to challenge or refuse school's authority is as much a slave to it as the student who devotes himself to placating it, and in a sense this is true. It would be better if the choice were not between learning algebra – or reading or history – and maintaining one's self-respect. But that is exactly the point. Students should not have to spend so much time in an institution that forces such a choice on them. They ought to be able to criticize their schooling without being punished for doing so; means other than passive resistance ought to be available to them. Perhaps then educators could learn from the students about which conditions and practices allow them to learn.

Upon hearing that some students consciously refuse to learn, the inclination of some educators might be to say, “Well, then, how can we get them to learn?” Yet education should not be about *getting* anybody to do anything. To return to Kohl’s central point, learning involves assent, free will, choice. To those who see teaching as a process of manipulation or as a treatment students require, these human qualities will seem troublesome and frustrating. But those who are *glad* that students are in fact people and not machines should find it heartening that they therefore exhibit such obviously human qualities as insistence on autonomy and belief in their right to make choices. The wrong lesson to learn from Kohl and Fader would be that the notion of “assent” can be yet another tool of manipulation or seduction, another way to get kids to do what adults want.

Yes, we should let kids make choices and we should pay attention to what they choose, but we shouldn’t be tempted to use the information to try to trick kids into fulfilling someone else’s goals and expectation. A better lesson to learn from Kohl and Fader is that schools should not be places where students’ dignity and autonomy are in such jeopardy that not-learning becomes the best course of action.

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