

“How I Got my DIY Degree ... at the University of Planet Earth” by William Upsi Wimsatt

When I was 14, my hero was a rapper named KRS-One who dropped out of eighth grade and educated himself by reading and apprenticing in the music business. I informed my parents that I intended to do the same, and they told me it was illegal. Having spent all my life in schools where knowledge is measured out in tiny spoonfuls, I wasn't resourceful enough to figure out they were wrong. And, in retrospect, I admit I was a little scared.

So I stayed in high school and then headed off to Oberlin College, but my desire to pursue other avenues of education persisted. Then one summer day three years ago, I visited Reading Frenzy, a little bookstore in Portland, Oregon, and asked the owner what her favorite books were. “That one!” she said without hesitation, pointing to *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education* by Grace Llewellyn. I'm not a teenager, was my first thought, and I already have a real life, thanks anyway. But I ended up buying the book and was struck by Llewellyn's argument that learning happens naturally and school mostly just gets in the way.

When I returned to Oberlin that fall, I realized that there were no courses covering the things I most wanted to learn. No sex classes. No friendship classes. No classes on how to build an organization, raise money, navigate a bureaucracy, create a database, buy a house, love a child, spot a scam, ask the right questions, talk someone out of suicide, or figure out what's important. Those are

the things that enhance or mess up people's lives, not whether they know economic theory or can analyze literature.

So I quit college and enrolled as a student at the University of Planet Earth, the world's oldest and largest educational institution. It has billions of professors, tens of millions of books, and unlimited course offerings. Tuition is free, and everybody designs his or her own major.

Here's my curriculum: Live in a different city every year. Attend a different place of worship every week. Seek out hundreds of mentors to help me find answers to my thousands of questions. Spend the rest of the time in the library and on the Internet. Create lists, make charts, and undertake the most ambitious projects I can think of. Create my own personal bible, almanac, and telephone book. Live in the poorest neighborhoods in order to learn how to get along in the world and to save money, so I can travel to a different continent each year.

I'm doing this for five years as a freshman survey course. Then I'll have a better idea of what to pursue as a sophomore.

Of course, my course of studies keeps changing as new opportunities arise. I had to scale back on some of my goals because I need to make a living. My parents wouldn't give me the money they would have spent on college to help me educate myself. But self-education is mainly about solving problems, so I keep looking for creative ways to learn what I want to know.

My only regret is that I didn't start earlier. My friend Anna Fritz read *The Teenage Liberation Handbook* and quit Milwaukee High School of the Arts when she was 15. Instead of taking music classes, she played professionally and studied privately with a renowned cello teacher at the University of Wisconsin. Instead of taking science, she apprenticed with a botanist at a museum greenhouse. Instead of taking social studies, she worked as an organizer for Peace Action Milwaukee and represented the organization at national meetings in Washington, D.C.

Anna and I aren't alone. We're part of a self-schooling movement that includes people of all ages who have taken their education into their own hands. My friend John Payne was a barber in Detroit. He had faked his way through high school without ever learning how to read, but he supplemented his education by listening carefully to the men whose hair he cut. One of them was a crackhead named Willie who knew how to fix up abandoned houses. John asked Willie to teach him the trade, and now John owns 25 houses and two barbershops. And he has also taught himself how to read.

If it feels as if your education stopped after you left college, then a self-schooling program might rekindle the fires of learning in your soul. And if you're thinking about going back to school for an advanced degree in something-or-other, let me save you \$40,000 or so. Here are strategies that I've found useful in pursuing an education on my own.

How To Get Your DIY Degree:

1. **Recognize that you're self-motivated.** "But I'm not self-motivated," you say. Oh, really? Then why are you reading this magazine? For fun? Exactly.
2. **Enjoy yourself.** Give yourself permission to have fun while you're learning whatever you damn well please from sex to the stock market, fixing your car to fighting urban blight in whatever way you please. The point of self-education is to abandon the feelings of inadequacy you picked up in school.
3. **Team up with others.** Self-education doesn't mean learning by yourself. The most important thing is to find teachers who will push you to learn what you need. A book group might be a great place to start, but if it gets too comfortably chatty, then challenge the group to broaden its horizons.
4. **Scare away your shyness.** I was a painfully shy child. In sixth grade, I convinced my parents to let me transfer to a tough Chicago public school which at the time seemed terrifying to me. I'm not shy anymore.
5. **Save all your ideas.** Don't assume that you will always remember all the best ones. I carry a notebook with me and jot down every idea I get, putting a star next to the ones I really want to pursue.
6. **Act on what you learn.** If you don't change your life in some way every time you learn something, then what did you really learn? And you need to set up routines that keep offering you new challenges. One of my goals is to play a different sport each day of the week with members of a different ethnic group: Martial arts with East Asians. Capoeira with Brazilians. Soccer with Latino

immigrants. Basketball with African Americans in the ghetto. Tennis with WASPs in the suburbs.

7. **Attend conferences.** I love conferences. They're a great way to get inspired, immerse yourself in new ideas, and meet amazing people nobody has heard of yet. Last year I went to seven conferences in seven months: The Prairie Festival in Kansas. An African American youth leadership summit at Vassar. The Saguaro Seminar on civic engagement at Harvard. A philanthropy conference in Seattle. A community-organizing retreat in Colorado. The Media and Democracy Congress in New York City. And the Not Back to School Camp in Oregon. All seven cost me less than \$2,200, including travel and meals. (I hitchhike, ride Greyhound buses, stay with friends, and sometimes get my expenses paid for speaking at the conference.)
8. **Feed and water your mentors.** Most people-even famous people-feel underappreciated. If you admire someone for a specific reason, tell him or her. You'll be surprised to learn how few people do. Tell your mentors specifically what you want to learn from them, at their convenience. I have more than three dozen mentors on my "A" list, many of whom I've drafted at conferences.
9. **Don't quit school if you like it.** But remember, good grades aren't the most important thing you'll take away from college. Take time to make connections with your classmates, the activist leaders and CEOs of tomorrow.
10. **Recognize that friendship is learning.** This is especially true when you're building friendships with people you find intimidating or awkward to deal with:

your parents and siblings, cold-faced men in suits, brassy women, angry teenagers, nerdy cousins, bosses, New Agers, religious fundamentalists, self-righteous activists, folks who have done time, foreigners, poor people, rich people, the depressed, the egotistical. Learning to forge ties with all kinds of people and bring out the best in each other is the core of any self-education.

11. **Be prepared to be scared.** Learning sounds so nice and wholesome, doesn't it? Tell that to Adam and Eve. Learning is scary and often risky because the more you learn, the more you'll feel compelled to rearrange your basic assumptions about everything. And that brings chaos as well as excitement into your life.
12. **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** I'm starting a self-schooling foundation that will make it possible for more young people, especially poor kids, to educate themselves outside of school. I'm looking for highly successful dropouts as well as enthusiastic volunteers and donors with an interest in self-education.

