

Autodidacticism

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Autodidacticism (also **autodidactism**) is self-education or self-directed learning. An **autodidact** is a mostly self-taught person, as opposed to learning in a school setting or from a tutor.

A person may become an autodidact at nearly any point in his or her life. While some may have been educated in a conventional manner in a particular field, they may choose to educate themselves in other, often unrelated areas.

Self-teaching and self-directed learning are not necessarily lonely processes. Some autodidacts spend a great deal of time in libraries or on educative websites. Many, according to their plan for learning, avail themselves of instruction from family members, friends, or other associates (although strictly speaking this might not be considered autodidactic). Indeed, the term "self-taught" is something of a journalistic trope these days, and is often used to signify "non-traditionally educated", which is entirely different.

Inquiry into autodidacticism has implications for learning theory, educational research, educational philosophy, and educational psychology.

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Notable autodidacts

Occasionally, individuals have sought to excel in subjects outside the mainstream of conventional education:

- Socrates, Descartes, Avicenna, Benjamin Franklin, George Bernard Shaw, Feodor Chaliapin, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Alva Edison, and Malcolm X were autodidacts.

While Karl Popper did receive a college education, he never took courses in philosophy, and he did his initial work in the philosophy of science during the late 1920s and early 1930s while he was teaching science and math in high school. He then turned to the social sciences and attempted to transform them as well, again without any formal training or official mentoring. The best source for this story is Malachi Hacohen's book "Karl Popper: The Formative Years, 1902-1945". Also, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, arguably the most revolutionary philosopher of the 19th century, was never formally trained in philosophy.

- The cognitive scientist Walter Pitts of MIT was an autodidact. He taught himself mathematical logic, psychology, and neuroscience. He was one of the scientists who laid the foundations of cognitive sciences, artificial intelligence, and cybernetics.
- Forensic facial reconstruction artist Frank Bender is self-taught. His well-known forensic career started off with a day trip to a morgue, asked to try to put a face on the deceased, brought measurements home, created a successful facial reconstruction that led to his first (of many) IDs. He took only one semester of sculpture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia.
- Mathematical genius Srinivasa Ramanujan and Newton's contemporary Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz were largely self-taught in mathematics, as was Oliver Heaviside. Ramanujan is notable as an autodidact for having developed thousands of new mathematical theorems despite having no formal education in mathematics.
- A number of famous British scientists in the nineteenth century taught themselves. The chemist and physicist Michael Faraday, the natural historians Alfred Russel Wallace (co-discoverer of natural selection) and Henry Walter Bates, "Darwin's Bulldog" Thomas Henry Huxley, the social philosopher Herbert Spencer.
- Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* depicts an autodidact who is a self-deluding dilettante.
- Physicist and Judo expert Moshe Feldenkrais developed an autodidactic method of self-improvement based on his own experience with self-directed learning in physiology and neurology. He was motivated by his own crippling knee injury.
- Gerda Alexander, Heinrich Jacoby, and a number of other 20th century European innovators worked out methods of self-development that stressed intelligent sensitivity and awareness.
- John Boyd, fighter pilot and military strategist, was an accomplished autodidact who not only revolutionized fighter-aircraft design, but also developed new theories on learning and creativity.
- Mythologist Joseph Campbell exemplified the autodidactic method. Following completion of his masters degree, Campbell decided not to go forward with his plans to earn a doctorate, and he went into the woods in upstate New York, reading deeply for five years. According to poet and author Robert Bly, a friend of Campbell's, Campbell developed a systematic program of reading nine hours a day.
- The popular writer of science fiction, fantasy and children's books Terry Pratchett is quoted as saying "I didn't go to university. Didn't even finish A-levels. But I have sympathy for those who did".
- The musician Frank Zappa is noted for his exhortation, "Drop out of school before

your mind rots from exposure to our mediocre educational system. Forget about the Senior Prom and go to the library and educate yourself if you've got any guts. Some of you like Pep rallies and plastic robots who tell you what to read."

- Mark Twain is known to have said: "I have never let my schooling interfere with my education."
- Playwright August Wilson dropped out of school in the ninth grade but continued to educate himself by spending long hours reading at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library.
- Arnold Schoenberg called himself an 'autodidact' in an interview.^[1] Other largely self-taught composers include notably Joachim Raff, Georg Philipp Telemann and Edward Elgar.
- Several notable people considered to have an inspirational religious message have been autodidacts: for instance John Bunyan, George Fox and Rodney "Gypsy" Smith.
- Many successful filmmakers did not attend college or dropped out. These include Steven Spielberg, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, Paul Thomas Anderson, David Fincher, Stanley Kubrick, John Huston, Woody Allen and Steven Soderbergh.
- Penn Jillette, a member of the comedy and magic duo Penn & Teller, declared both he and his partner Teller to be autodidacts in an episode of their television series, *Penn & Teller: Bullshit!*.^[2]
- Vincent J. Schaefer, who discovered the principle of cloud seeding, was schooled to 10th grade when asked by parents to help with family income. He continued his informal education by reading, participation in free lectures by scientists and exploring nature through year-round outdoor activity.
- Modern Pashto poet Ameer Hamza Shinwari though not educated in the regular manner, was able to establish his career through self-education.
- Robert Lewis Shayon, early radio producer, author, television critic for *Christian Science Monitor* and *The Saturday Review*, and Ivy League professor, never had a college education.
- David Bowie, singer, musician, multi-instrumentalist, actor and painter. Has never trained in any of these fields and only received a few singing lessons in the 1960s (as reported by his former manager, Ken Pitt) and as a teenager he took some lessons on saxophone by Ronnie Ross. All other instruments (including piano, keyboards/synths, rhythm/electric/acoustic guitar, harmonica, koto, limited bass and percussion), he taught himself. His paintings and sculptures were created (and exhibited) without any formal art school training. He took a few lessons in movement and dance with the Lindsey Kemp's Dance company but trained himself in mime.
- Kató Lomb, one of first simultaneous interpreters of the world, spoke more than ten languages fluently and she learnt them by gleaning their rules and vocabulary from books (mostly novels), as she described in her book *Polyglot: How I Learn Languages* (<http://tesl-ej.org/ej45/fr1abs.html>) (2008), originally published in Hungarian in four editions (1970, 1972, 1990, 1995).

Autodidacticism in fiction

The earliest novels to deal with the concept of autodidacticism were the Arabic novels, *Philosophus Autodidactus*, written by Ibn Tufail in 12th-century Islamic Spain, and *Theologus Autodidactus*, written by Ibn al-Nafis in 13th-century Egypt. Both deal with autodidactic feral children living in isolation from society on a desert island and discovering the truth as they grow up without having been in contact with other human beings.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière describes the emancipatory education of Joseph Jacotot, a post-Revolutionary philosopher of education who discovered that he could teach things he did not know. The book is both a history and a contemporary intervention in the philosophy and politics of education, through the concept of autodidacticism; Rancière chronicles Jacotot's "adventures", but he articulates Jacotot's theory of "emancipation" and "stultification" in the present tense.

See also

- Unschooling
- John Taylor Gatto
- Jacques Rancière
- Critical pedagogy
- Invisible College
- *Philosophus Autodidactus*
- *Theologus Autodidactus*

References

1. ^ Arnold Schoenberg Center (Halsey Stevens interview) (http://www.schoenberg.at/6_archiv/paintings/catalogue/texts/museum_e.htm)
2. ^ *Penn & Teller: Bullshit*, Episode 3-06 "College", first aired May 30, 2005.

Further reading

- SOLOMON, JOAN. *The Passion to Learn: An Inquiry into Autodidacticism*. ISBN 0-415-30418-0.
- HAYES, CHARLES D. *Self-University: The Price of Tuition Is the Desire to Learn. Your Degree Is a Better Life*. ISBN 0-9621979-0-4.
- LLEWELLYN, GRACE. *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education*. ISBN 0-9629591-7-0.
- RANCIÈRE, JACQUES. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford Univ. Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8047-1969-1.
- HAILEY, KENDALL. *The Day I Became an Autodidact*. ISBN 0-385-29636-3.
- HAYES, CHARLES D. *The Rapture of Maturity: A Legacy of Lifelong Learning*. ISBN 09621979-4-7.

- CAMERON, BRENT and MEYER, BARBARA. *SelfDesign: Nurturing Genius Through Natural Learning*. ISBN 1-59181-044-2.
- BROWN, RESA STEINDEL. *The Call to Brilliance: A True Story to Inspire Parents and Educators*. ISBN 0-9778369-0-8.

External links

- Autodidactproject.org (<http://www.autodidactproject.org/>)
- A Resource List for All Autodidacts (http://www.eliteskills.com/free_education/?foo=x)
- MIT OpenCourseWare (<http://ocw.mit.edu/index.html>)
- Schools of Non-Institutional Education (<http://www.schoolsone.org>)
- Independent Collegiate Study Free Open University (<http://www.collegiateindependentstudy.org>)
- Email community for autodidacts (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Autodidactics/>)

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