



Episode 303-School vs. Education

Guest: Brett Veinotte

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WOODS: I guess you and I met early last year at the Liberty Forum, put on by the Free State Project. Are you actually in New Hampshire?

VEINOTTE: I am. I've been here pretty much since 2010, and I've been involved in one way or another, different levels at different times, but most of my activism has been around the show. So I'm connected here, and I think it's a great place to live, but you won't see me in any Free Keene videos.

WOODS: Okay, well, your podcast—what category is it in in iTunes? Do they have an education category?

VEINOTTE: Oh, yeah, yeah. There's actually quite a bit of competition in the education category because, you know, anything that's like foreign language instruction or how-to, people throw it into the education category. I will say, though, that we are the only show that is consistently hitting on schooling versus education, and looking at school issues and not so much delving into all the problems of school like zero tolerance. We did that in the early days of the show, and it got pretty tiring. Now we're spending most of our time talking about what real education is, but also frequently reminding people that schooling, government schooling, is not that.

WOODS: Well, I guess that's our starting point then, before we can know that government schooling is not that. In your view, what is education really all about?

VEINOTTE: I think that education should really be self-directed, intrinsically motivated. It's lifelong. You know, it's not something that speaks to 12 years or 12 years, plus four years, plus two years of graduate school to be really educated. I think that people develop negative attitudes about what they call education because it's always associated with force and pain and boredom, and I think a lot of adults are left unmotivated to learn more about a broad range of topics because the learning experience of school was so miserable for so many of us. So most importantly, education is lifelong. It's intrinsically motivated, it's self-directed, and it's not

something that somebody else gives you. It's something that you have to go out and seek for yourself.

WOODS: It's important you make that point about it. Education is more than just the time that you devote to formal study; it is a lifelong process. I hear a lot of people saying to me: it's such a shame that when I was in school, I didn't learn the things I should have learned, and oh, well, what can I do now? Well, you have your whole life is what you can do now! There are so many things you can do now I hardly know where to begin in telling you. But we've become conditioned to think of education as something you do sitting in an uncomfortable chair with a built-in desktop with a chalkboard in front of you. Listening to this podcast is a form of education. Reading any worthwhile book is a form of education.

VEINOTTE: Yes, absolutely.

WOODS: What about this self-directed issue—the response that you're liable to get, and perhaps even from me, is this whole thing that education needs to be child-centered and self-directed, and we need the child to be motivated, and the way you motivate the child pursue of interest to that particular child, all seems to make sense, but there's that nagging feeling that a child just ain't going to be interested in the multiplication tables, and some things you just have to sit down and do even though it is painful.

VEINOTTE: I think that's a very good point, and there is real instruction to be done, right? Like critical thinking—that classical education that does involve a methodology that needs to be taught. I think that when you do have those things that need to be taught, you have to let it ride on top of the motivation and enthusiasm of the learner. So I will give you an example. Last night we were doing a live show, and our topic was crypto-archaeology, and I was just remembering this story like a few years ago I was working with this homeschool boy. I was kind of just a facilitator and a guide. He was eight. He was absolutely fascinated by the pseudo-History Channel's program *Ancient Aliens*. Are you familiar with the show?

WOODS: I am not.

VEINOTTE: Okay, have you heard of the ancient astronaut theory that thousands of years ago, predating the great civilization of Egypt or Mesopotamia, aliens came, and they seeded life on this planet, or somehow genetically modified human beings into what we are today? There are people who take this very seriously, and they go back into the archaeological or anthropological records, and they cherry-pick information that fits that argument. So there is a lot of confirmation bias, there is a lot of logical fallacies. But if you're eight years old, and you're really enthusiastic about the idea of aliens, you're not really ready to defend yourself against that, and that was the situation for this boy. So he is definitely had this high level of motivation to pursue this study of ancient aliens, and the whole time as the facilitator or the guide and saying, oh, I don't know, this isn't good; where is this going to go? And because he was enthusiastic, I was able to check off things that I thought he really needed to learn. Like, how do you evaluate the evidence that other people present? And there was all kinds of scientific

lessons about astronomy and archaeology and anthropology that we were able to check off along the way. So starting with something that is completely silly—the ancient aliens theory—and even if that is a plausible theory, the way they go about presenting it on this show is just completely laden with fallacies and confirmation bias and begging the question. But through that silly exploration, we were able to have a meaningful educational experience. So I think that the learner being motivated is very important, but once you have a curious and motivated learner, yeah, the stage is set for instruction to be possible.

WOODS: So are you then an advocate of unschooling? Are you somebody whose view is if that's what works for people, that's fine, and if a more traditional-structured curriculum works for somebody else, that's fine? Where do you come down on that?

VEINOTTE: Well, yeah, I think it's different for everybody. I think anyone who wants to do home education, and I've tried to in the last couple of years get away from the word unschooling because it has "school" in it—homeschooling especially. Only school can do school. We're trying to do education. So that means something totally different. I think that unschooling definitely has its challenges. I can see why people would balk at that, especially if they are concerned they are not going to be able to check off what they consider to be essential skills, and there's no debate about that. I mean, some things are essential skills. But I think that having that free environment where the learner can follow his or her own curiosity is very important. But remember, too, that parents have, even if they don't want to control their child or control their curriculum, they have control over that environment. So they can put things into that environment. I remember this boy I was telling you about. His parents had built this amazing classroom for him, filled with resources and easy access to the Internet and YouTube. So you can create opportunities within a relatively unstructured environment for I think the learning that you as the parent, or the educator, want to take place.

WOODS: Brett, tell us about the podcast itself. You've got—how many episodes do you have so far? You've been doing it for a while, right?

VEINOTTE: Yeah, I think we recorded 322 last time. I would say 350 different pieces of audio available on the website.

WOODS: Wow! Nice, okay, well this is episode of 303 of this show. So we are catching up to you. By the way, the show notes page for this episode will be TomWoods.com/303. We will have links to everything we're talking about here. Tell me how you're able to talk about this stuff week in and week out and have fresh things to say. What kind of array of topics are you hitting on these days?

VEINOTTE: That's a good question, because in the beginning back when I started in 2009 so much of this had built up. I had worked in and around the school system for over a decade, and in the three years prior to doing the podcast, I had been tutoring in the Boston area and in the New Hampshire area in some very competitive public schools. I was doing a lot of SAT tutoring. I was doing a lot of academic tutoring. And I found myself in a lot of meetings in the school with

teachers and parents and guidance counselors really biting my lips and not saying the things that I wanted to say, not identifying the problems that I felt needed identification about the school system generally. So when I started the podcast in 2009, I blurted out I feel like the first 20 episodes: what my problems were with school, what I believed to be the sort of hidden lessons of school, obedience, conformity, and even as a result of that, a kind of political or philosophical or intellectual apathy. I wound up doing a big series right out of the gate about understanding politics, because I wanted people to understand that I wasn't pursuing political solutions. I didn't believe in the idea that the public schools could be reformed. We did a series on how kids are made to feel defective if they can't conform to that environment of school and some of the consequences of nonconformity and how students could protect themselves from that.

But after I did about 100 episodes, I said, okay, enough, people get it. School is bad. It's right in the title of our show. Let's start talking about what education actually is. So we move from there into more in-depth theories about history. We have had an ongoing series about solutions and alternatives. We did a big series last year about productivity and better organization. We have done series about logic and looking at top media examples of people abusing logic or ignoring it completely. We did a show about Bill Maher, for example, who has this very popular HBO show, and we went through episodes of his program, which stands up to the rest of television as a pretty intelligent debate show, and we looked at the fallacies that they used to make that program possible. We did a series on the trivium method of critical thinking: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. And we even did a series that I was really proud of this past year on the six pillars of self-esteem, which is based on a book by Nathaniel Branden, and along the way we're always, wherever we can, discussing homeschooling, home education, unschooling, and providing suggestions for that as well, talking with people who'd done that. I'd like to be doing more of that, but I do try to check in periodically and say, hey, remember to consider these things as well.

So the show is very broad. I think it's a soft sell—this idea that school sucks, especially since we're trying to do reach high school and college students. They come to us already on our side. I don't think there's a lot of people between the ages of 16 and 20 who feel very differently about school, and hopefully the show has provided a kind of window or doorway into the philosophy of liberty. I came to the philosophy of liberty by understanding the problems with the school system and wanting to investigate that more. So I am hoping more people will do the same and have this valuable introduction to this philosophy—the work of people like you, Bob Murphy, Jeffrey Tucker. They've all been on the show at one point or another. But we always bring it back to schooling versus education, and that's kind of the niche we've carved out. So there's plenty of work that we can do. I've gotten to a point now after 300 episodes where as long as something is educational, I would be willing to do a show about it. I do stay away from current events. I try to make the shows kind of timeless. But if I think it has educational value for my audience, I will definitely prepare a show and put it out.

WOODS: What are some mistakes that you find home educators making?

VEINOTTE: I think that unschooling can become a kind of unparenting where some people are just completely hands off with their children, and I don't really—I am not a parent myself, and I say that over and over again in the show, and people who are critical of some of the things I say remind me of that frequently. So it is difficult to look at what other people are doing and have a real specific criticisms. But just because you're giving this hands-off approach as far as education is concerned, I hope for people that doesn't turn into a hands-off approach as far as parenting is concerned. That's one caution that I have. Or even addressing the concern that you brought up earlier not understanding that there are some essential skills that might require, even if it's more subtle, some form of instruction from an educator. Those are the two that come to mind.

WOODS: OK, and those are very good. I am going to use the term homeschooling just because I sometimes say Civil War, even though I know it's full of problems. There's no way I am going to retrain my brain in middle age at this point. But I know very successful examples of it. But there is also, I think, an unreported underbelly of really unsuccessful examples. Now, that's not to say that it would be better to send them to the government indoctrination factory. I am not in any way saying that. But I know of a lot of cases where "homeschooling" really means nothing happens. And it's not even that they have a philosophy of unschooling, it's that the mother has a lot of children, she's totally overwhelmed, and the father feels like it's his job to go and provide materially for the family, so it's up to the wife to do the homeschooling. She can't possibly keep up with it. She's expected to do the house and a million other things, and so the result is basically nothing happens, and this goes on far more than people realize because we all keep hearing that the spelling bee champion is a homeschooler, and the statistics for college admission are very good for homeschoolers, but the reality is, there really is this problem out there of completely overwhelmed parents.

VEINOTTE: Yeah, that's a really good point, and I am surprised that anyone in the second decade of the 21st century would still be trying to do this as an island—with the family as an island. There are so many great resources for networking with people in your area. One of the things that we've talked about frequently is setting up some kind of cooperative where people can share the duties of teaching or monitoring or setting up activities. I can imagine that being terribly overwhelming for one mother or one father with multiple children trying to have some kind of home education environment without any help from anybody else. There's so many resources out there for home education in many states. It's different from state to state. New Hampshire is obviously pretty friendly for home education, but there's definitely ways to get connected with people in your area to share ideas; even if you can't come face to face with people there's resources online. I could see how there could be a high level of burnout for a parent, and kids just wind up in front of a video game system—not that that's entirely uneducational; depending on what they're doing, I think there's a lot of value in that, or there

could be a lot of value in that or in front of YouTube or, God forbid, in front of the television. I could see how that could happen.

So I think that I am hoping to on my show reach people who are planning on becoming parents. My target demographic is really about 16 to 24. I want high school and college students, and I want people thinking about these things long before they become parents. People have certainly written to me and said it was because of your show that I took my children out of public school, and I feel like that's an accomplishment, but quite honestly I also feel a little worried sometimes. Like, that's quite an impact to have, and I hope those people who I don't know, and I never talk to beyond a couple of email exchanges really thought this out. They really had a plan of action before they did this. And that was one of the reasons why I wanted to even get away from talking so much about the horror show that government school is, because I didn't want to force anyone's hand, so to speak. I wanted to talk about what real education is, the value that it has, different approaches to doing it, provide hopefully some curricula for self-study, for home education. But I absolutely agree with the concern that, yes, there probably are a lot of people out there who are not providing an education or not setting up an environment where their children are seeking education for themselves.

WOODS: Now, there are two reasons I would want to ask you about New Hampshire in particular. One is that you have personal experience there. But secondly, New Hampshire is not a state that's just chosen at random on this show. New Hampshire is the heart of the Free State Project, and there are people no doubt out there who are on the fence about whether or not they should commit to moving to New Hampshire. So I would like you to give us a sense of what specific sorts of resources have developed around, for example, the Free State people who are living in New Hampshire—no doubt many of whom are interested in this kind of education. What are they doing among themselves that would be interesting to our audience here?

VEINOTTE: Well, I can speak from personal experience. We were able to set up just a small cooperative. It didn't last very long because people went in different directions, but when I was working near the state capitol a couple of years ago, we were able to set up some continuous art groups. There was a school, actually, that was set up called the Scholars Academy that had a real Free State presence and actually got a lot of financial support from Free Staters that went on for a few years, and I think eventually it dissolved because the directors of the school wanted to convert it into a charter school and get state funds instead of having it privately funded, and a lot of interest waned pretty quickly. But there are people just working together in small groups—play dates where people bring their children together, and I am not super-connected to that, but I would like to see a lot more of it happening. I have seen, like I said, some examples of this in the past, but I think the good thing about this is your neighbors could be very, very like-minded. Right? So even if it's a problem, people are getting more and more worried about things like CPS, especially people who are doing home education and that's Child Protective Services for those who—it might be a different acronym for people in different states, but there's support here, and there's protection here, and that's important as well. I

think that's just as important as people getting together and having an art group that there are like-minded people nearby in case you have a problem as a result of what you're doing.

WOODS: Would you say that the biggest stumbling blocks right now to more and more people embracing a home-based education, or just something other than the typical government school form of education, are external restrictions by government or whatever—cultural frowning upon this form of education—or would you say they are more internal—a lack of self-confidence: I am not sure we could pull it off, I don't think we have the resources, we're not wealthy enough? Where do you think the real obstacles are right now?

VEINOTTE: Well, I think a lot of those internals that you mentioned are determined by externals—people saying: I can't do this. I am not qualified. We both need to work. I think that kind of thinking results from external pressures. Most people don't leave the school system thinking they are capable of teaching anybody. And they are happy to depend on this system, and I would even think they would want to tell themselves a story about the goodness of the system because they need to put their kids someplace 35 hours a week while they go to work to earn the money that they need. So I'm completely sympathetic to all of the hesitations that people would have about pursuing home education for their own families. I really think it's both. I think there is a lot of economic pressures on people where most home education environments would involve at least one parent staying home multiple days out of the week. That's very difficult to do today, and of course, yeah, I think people don't feel, and I think there's a lot of training to feeling this way. They feel like they are not qualified to do this. This is something that has to be done by experts, you know?

So really, it's both. I hope through the show that people hear stories about others who've done this and others who want to do this or even young people who have gone through the system, who've been home educated, and they get some success stories, and that builds confidence or it shows them at least that, yes, this is something that is possible, and there's ways to do this even with all the external pressures of the world today. It's very hard for me to speak on external pressures that are related to the government because it's really so different from state to state. New Hampshire is pretty homeschooling friendly. I mentioned that I worked with this boy. I had to check in with his school district periodically. They were extremely flexible with me. They were happy that we had created this environment and that learning was going on. They did not give me a very specific checklist. There was no periodic testing. They were happy that we, or the advisor I should say, it was just one person that I was dealing with directly from the school, he was really happy that we had come up with a milieu that was helpful for this boy. I know in some states it's very difficult. We hear these horror stories of parents being arrested, and their children are—they are saying that children are truants because they haven't gone through all of the hoops that that state has set up to make homeschooling difficult. So the pressures are more extreme in different places around the country, I think.

Show notes: <http://tomwoods.com/303>