

Home Education

m a g a z i n e

January-February 2006

Volume 23 Number 1

Learning Logs

Over the past few years, as I have wrestled with and chewed on various philosophies of learning, our homeschool has changed with each new insight. The most important change has been the shift of responsibility from me, alone, to all of the members of our family. I have been on a long road from my place at the podium in a high school English classroom. Now I'm still guiding and teaching, but I'm not making all the plans.

Involving the whole family in our learning has had a positive impact on our household. I have enjoyed the relief of not deciding what to study and why and how, Jerry and I have enjoyed watching what the kids come up with, and the kids have enjoyed being able to follow their strengths and interests. To shift the responsibility to the children, I have begun keeping a learning log for them. Four-year-old Sam likes to talk about the fun things we do and pipes in with ideas, but Stella, at six, is more able to see the big picture and seizes the opportunity to direct her own learning and plan out her projects.

A learning log is a place to write about our learning activities. Sounds pretty simple, yet it is a hefty structure in our homeschool. Our learning-log conversations begin with a question or two, such as, "What was the most fun thing you did today?" or "Tell me about something you had trouble with this week." Then, as the answers spill out, I try to keep up with recording her thoughts as she tells me she loves science and wants to do more experiments, that she had the most fun yesterday playing kitties with Sam, that trying to tie her shoes makes her mad sometimes, and that she wants to read more Greek myths.

Our eclectic, Charlotte Mason-inspired style of learning together has led us down some pretty interesting roads. It never

Ivy Rutledge enjoys learning alongside her children. She spends her time juggling homeschool activities, freelance writing and organic gardening. You may reach her at irutledge@riad.r.com

Ivy Rutledge

would have occurred to me to study fairies; after all, they aren't found in many first grade-curricula. However, in our homeschool, fairy lore led to a look at Scotland, Shakespeare, lilies of the valley, Robert Louis Stevenson and fairy roses, branching out into more general studies of flowers, flight and poetry. In leaving the relative safety of our chronological history and literature, I have had the faith in our curiosity to venture into the wide open realm of subjects in the great beyond. By asking a few simple questions, I have been able to release fascinating lists of topics, books to find and science projects to do, and then I can tailor our activities to her interests.

Before the learning log, Stella and I had occasional conversations about what she was learning, but for the most part I kept track of things myself, and we made gentle progress towards our learning goals. Now that we keep a more detailed notebook, she articulates exactly what she wants and how she feels. These details are a treasure chest for me when planning out the week—I've got her ideas to build our week around. For instance today she said to me, "I want to learn how to train Carmella (our cat) to jump over the swing set." I paused, frowned. This wasn't exactly what I was looking for in terms of learning goals, but I did write down exactly what she wanted me to write. "Then I want to make a volcano." Aha! Much easier to do, so I flip through the science experiment book and find out how to make a volcano. Then I find a song to help her remember how to tie her shoes.

You could almost say I am learning more from the learning log than she is. I look through the pages of her thoughts and I see a range of silly and serious, from book titles to field trips to science experiments, and I realize that I have allowed her to list her ideas and have respected each and every one that rests on its page. Her self-evaluations give her a chance to figure out how to solve

her own problems; for example, in telling me she ran out of pages in the book she was writing, she decided to add more pages to the end. In shifting the responsibility of problem solving to her, I have found my sense as a teacher, learning how to facilitate her natural processes and giving her the independence she needs to grow. And respecting her ideas and allowing them to flourish has taught her that her ideas are important and worthy.

Another big discovery I have made through this process is that the topics that show up in Stella's want lists are always more challenging and interesting than the ones I would have come up with. Learning is all around us, and given my full attention, Stella can readily rattle off a long list of projects that she wants to do. For example, in one entry her list went like this: she wanted to finish making her Earth Day flag, which involved dyeing a lace trim for it; find out more about fairies; start a Little House book club; and write an entire series of books about Scarlet Cat, a character she made up. These are projects she devised for herself and are, by their very nature, age appropriate. Once I started writing these things down, I felt her excitement grow as she realized we were actually going to do the things on her list.

We have our learning-log conversations about once a week, and we touch base on how well she is meeting her goals, changing them as we feel the need. Through this process, Stella is acquiring the language she needs to direct her own studies. We talk about the topics she has gotten bored with, like flight, and decide where to go next. During our talks, we decide on the actions we should take together or independently in order to achieve her goals, and she is picking up the skills needed to manage a project from idea to finished project, if it makes it that far. She has learned how to shelve a project that is stagnating and revive it when

and if the time is right. Her finished projects are a source of pride as she readily describes the process she took in creating them.

By writing down the things that do and don't work for her, she is becoming aware of her best methods, helps, strengths and weaknesses. Metacognition, this is called in professional teaching circles, but it's not rocket science and doesn't need a fancy name; we're just teaching her to know what she likes and where she would like to go with it.

Learning together has been a wonderful adventure for us, and we have been rewarded with the wonder of watching our children's exploration and discovery turn into ideas that unfold in unpredictable and special ways.

HEM



Stella Rutledge draws in her unicorn book. By Ivy Rutledge

More About Learning Logs

A learning log can be a conversation as well as a private place for a child—it is up to you and your child to decide what you need. You can record the thoughts of young children for them, and you can also write your own thoughts in a dialogue form with your child. Writing letters back and forth in a notebook can be an effective way to communicate and share ideas.

Keeping a learning log can also be a practical way to document learning. Unschoolers in particular can use learning logs to show progress in traditional subject areas as they are touched upon in day-to-day explorations. Even homeschoolers with curricula will find that having a safe place to record their thoughts on learning will help to identify areas that need change.

Older students who record their thoughts in a learning log can touch

base with parents periodically, using their writing as a starting point for a conversation about learning goals and current issues. There are myriad ways to take the concept of a learning log and put it to use in your homeschool, tweaking to make it exactly what you need it to be.

Most young writers will appreciate some questions to get their thoughts flowing, inviting a list that may lead to new ideas. Allow your child's thoughts to flow freely, and keep the conversation or writing session a fun, safe time for your child.

You can adjust the questions for younger or older students or for a particular subject.

Here are some sample questions for a learning log.

- What can you do well?
- Who are your teachers?
- What are your favorite activities?

- What is exciting to you?
- What was the most fun thing you did today?
- Where are some places you learn?
- What have you learned today?
- How did you learn it?
- Tell me about your projects.
- What projects would you like to abandon? Why?
- What has been confusing or hard for you?
- What do you do when something is hard to do?
- How do you feel when you try new things?
- What would you like to learn to do?
- How can you learn these things?
- What would you like to change?

[See also "Ask Carol," page 12]

HEM