

The Practice of Freedom: A History of the Self Education Foundation

by Jessica Hoffmann ([Posted on EnoughEnough.org April 3, 2010](#))

I don't have a college degree. Though I was on the path to go to a private liberal-arts college out of high school, after a series of financial-aid-related bureaucratic snafus, I ended up one gray morning when I was 18 staring at a sheet of paper offering aid mostly in the form of loans. I'd been raised by a single mom whose finances were generally precarious and who was afraid of the credit game. She never had credit cards or car loans or a mortgage or anything like that when I was a kid, and so the loan concept felt unfamiliar and frightening to me. I was pretty much on my own in terms of finances and big decisions at that point in my life, handling the college/tuition stuff by myself, without any parental or other guidance, and trying to go to school in a small town where jobs were scarce. The idea of signing on to a bunch of debt made little sense to me. I thought: I can read and write, research and explore ideas, on my own; libraries are free, and the world is vast and full of lessons. I don't need to go into debt for this.

Actually, my not doing college started before that. Sitting in class one afternoon late in my senior year of high school, just months before I was supposed to go to a college I'd applied to excitedly the fall before, I thought: I don't want to go there yet. I've been in school almost my entire life. Its structures and systems are the main things I know. I want to be outside of all that for a minute before going from the insular social and academic world of high school to another insular social and academic world, one literally perched on a small grassy hill set off from the town it's located in. I wrote a letter to that college asking to defer admission for a year.

During that year, I lived in a big city thousands of miles from the big city where I'd grown up, felt lonely a lot, worried that I was "fucking up my life" (because in the world of educational elitism I'd grown up in, bailing on college, even temporarily, was a major fuck-up), worked at a small bookstore and loved it although the pay left me with little after I paid my exorbitant big-city rent (so my roommate and I ate lots of Cream of Wheat and sometimes shoplifted, and once in a while her boyfriend, who worked in a health-food store on the opposite coast, would mail us a box of food he'd pilfered from his workplace), wrote and read widely, walked everywhere, did a lot of thinking ... It was a hard year and a good one. I learned a lot from all the reading I did, and also from being sort of loosed in the world, from feeling stupid and incompetent living outside the realm I'd always felt smart in (school), from having to gain and practice new skills and kinds of knowledge, from feeling sometimes isolated and sometimes thrilled by a sense of autonomy, from feeling life without the familiar structures of planned curriculum and school calendars. And when, the next fall, I was ready to start college, I discovered that the tuition grants I'd initially been offered were no longer available after my year off. That's when the loan option emerged, and I stared at the loan papers and couldn't bring myself to sign and decided I'd keep learning outside those systems.

That's one part of my story of self-education and money.

In another part of my story, a few years later, my dad started making a lot of money, and one day I realized I needed to rethink my sense of my class identity. I'd been raised by a struggling single mom. And while my dad had always figured out how to make his child-support payments and could sometimes also help pay for stuff my mom couldn't afford, he wasn't a rich guy during my childhood. He lived in a van for a time (a time I have fond memories of, when he and my sister and I

would spend our weekends together camping on various California beaches), and he struggled a lot money-wise for years. But by the time I was in my early twenties, he had become quite successful in dominant culture's terms, and I realized that my sense of myself as a poor kid among rich kids—an identity I'd settled into after years of feeling alienated among wealthy classmates in the fancy public-school classes my mom was savvy enough to get me into, after I stopped trying to pass as equally "classy" as them and started questioning economic and cultural hierarchies—well, that identity was no longer quite apt. A part of me was connected to wealth, to class privilege, now.

And so I immediately went looking for books and articles by other class-privileged lefties, assuming there must be lots of work out there by people who had reckoned with the combination of having wealth (or access to wealth) within an unjust economic system and believing in economic justice. That work must be out there, I figured, I just hadn't found it before because I wasn't looking for it—it wasn't relevant to me. Now it was, yet after months of searching, I'd found hardly anything, not even articles in which famous lefty professors or lawyers talked honestly about their salaries and how their politics informed their personal relationships with wealth (which is why Dean's piece [here](#) is so important). I didn't find much to learn from in this area until I started meeting and talking to peers who were struggling with similar questions (largely through [Resource Generation](#)). One day Tyrone gave me [his zine](#). Another time Dean and I [organized a cross-class dinner party](#) to talk about some of this stuff with our friends. Enough, a radical independent publishing project, started posting amazing content about the personal politics of resisting capitalism. In these and other community-created spaces outside dominant institutions of education, people are learning together how to rethink philanthropy, our personal roles within capitalism, resource sharing, economic justice, interdependence ...

Now, I don't mean to categorically disparage formal education. The links between institutional education and jobs/living wages in this society are intense. And the students protesting UC tuition hikes, as just one example, are fighting an incredibly important fight for widespread access to education within public institutions—a fight that reveals yet more connections between learning and money. Also, I recognize the ways various privileges (including my mom's getting me and my sister into the best public-school classes in our area when we were kids, which was in part enabled by white privilege and her own class privilege, having been raised in an upper-middle-class family) have affected my ongoing project of self-education and my ability to work in fields where most others have college degrees. I just mean to let you know a little about why I was excited when Tyrone asked me to write about the Self-Education Foundation for Enough. Money and learning, rethinking traditional structures of resource sharing and education—these are themes that have been important in my personal life and my political/community work. Also, I think the very act of documenting activist histories is a kind of alt-education project. As my friend and frequent collaborator Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore said in a roundtable on activism and journalism that I facilitated for [LOUDmouth](#) several years ago, "Activists have to be journalists because our work is not being covered, and it will be disappeared from the media as soon as we snap our fingers. Activists need to document our work as much as possible because no one's gonna do it for us."

So, in the spirit of doing it for ourselves, for each other, and for future community workers, I've interviewed a bunch of people from the Self-Education Foundation, and read through all their old newsletters and reports and things, to provide this document of what SEF was, and how it worked, and why.

—Jessica Hoffmann

It Starts with an Idea ...

In spring 1998, *Utne* published an article called “How I Got My DIY Degree.” Written by *Bomb the Suburbs* author William Upski Wimsatt, it was a glimpse at the life of a guy who’d dropped out of college to learn from “the University of Planet Earth.” His self-created curriculum included guidelines like “Live in a different city every year” and “Seek out hundreds of mentors.” The article ended with this note: “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.”

Lots of people wrote letters in response to the article, and a few sent in donations for the as-yet-unformed self-schooling foundation. Among the respondents was a rich Chicago teenager who was bored by school and excited to throw his wealth into a project that promoted self-education. Months later, a mixed-class radical youth activist who wanted to see a politics of racial and economic justice brought to the home-schooling movement linked up. Others joined, too. And out of the varied passions of this crew, the Self-Education Foundation was born. Challenging traditional ideas of both education and philanthropy, SEF was a youth-led, grassroots-oriented project that in seven years directed more than \$30,000 to over 80 small, underfunded groups working on self- and community-based education.

SEF wasn’t perfect (what is?), but it was a transformative learning experience for everyone involved—and the story of SEF offers lots of lessons for those of us still dreaming, a decade later, of different ways of doing both education and social-movement funding. SEF was an experiment in altering how movements, and the people in them, engage with both knowledge and money.

... and with Collective Action

SEF cofounders William Upski Wimsatt, Karl Muth, and Emily Nepon came to the project from really different places. Wimsatt was an author/activist/speaker who wanted to mobilize the wealth of successful autodidacts in support of self-education opportunities for everyone. Muth was “completely dissatisfied with my upper-middle-class high-school existence ... I thought I was learning nothing.” He’d reached out to Wimsatt after reading “How I Got my DIY Education” in *Utne*. “I was really underprepared to play any role in the organization,” he says, but “I was pretty good about asking people for money; I wasn’t at all shy about money.” Nepon, who had been unschooled in childhood, had recently dropped out of an experimental-ish college and was involved in radical social-justice work, especially youth and anti-police-brutality activism. She wanted to see a politics of racial and economic justice brought to a self-education movement that often was individualistically focused on privileged families’ ability to opt out of ordinary schooling.

For a time their shared enthusiasm for self-education bridged the differences in their visions. By 2001, they had an expanded working crew, a board, and nonprofit status. They gave out their first \$10,000 in grants that year, and engaged in a couple organizing projects, including one that challenged racist school-funding inequities in public schools in Philadelphia, where SEF was by then based. Nepon proved to be the most hands-on of the cofounders—digging into the day-to-day work of running an organization—and that meant her vision largely guided the way SEF took shape. As the project progressed, the focus wasn’t so much on mobilizing the resources of wealthy autodidacts (Upski’s original vision) as it was on challenging traditional philanthropy while supporting innovative self-education organizing. And its vision of self-education broadened beyond what Muth had imagined: “SEF decided to take on a very diverse group of goals,” he said. “In retrospect, probably an overly ambitious mix of things – everything from traditional homeschooling to new urban homeschooling to the dropout movement [to] incarcerated self-education.”

Nepon and Wimsatt drew a solid group of inspired organizers to the project, and from 1998 to 2005, SEF existed as a small grassroots fund run by young activists. They raised money to give grants of \$100 to \$500 to inspiring activists in many different areas: homeschoolers and dropouts organizing for educational resources outside of schools, student-led school-reform projects, incarcerated self-educators and their supporters, independent media, and popular-education projects. Grantees were spread all over the U.S. and a few other countries geographically and were rooted in many different communities.

Giving Differently

“We believe that rich people aren’t the only ones who can talk, think, and ACT about money. Being a group of young women without access to great personal and family wealth (and the connections that go along with wealth), and deciding to take on the task of moving money is a huge challenge. We’re banking, literally, on great faith that our skills as self-educators will lead us through the learning process ... and our histories as organizers and community members will be all the connections we need.”

—From a 2001 SEF newsletter

SEF was “a totally experimental model of philanthropy,” Nepon said. The initial strategy was simple: “give 12 \$100 gifts to groups as a token of appreciation for their work – and then ask them to let us interview them for the newsletter.” The newsletter served as a way to expand people’s ideas about self-education. “Those interviews helped me get the way race impacts this field,” Nepon said, “with people of color having to deal with state systems of oppression, while white homeschoolers feel like it’s all free—[we’d] share those stories in a larger, movement-building context.”

Sara Zia Ebrahimi was drawn to SEF for the way it envisioned self-education beyond “white crunchy homeschoolers,” looking at “all different reasons and ways” people educate outside of traditional institutions, from prisoner-led programs to job training at the community level. After connecting with Nepon and Wimsatt, she became increasingly passionate about supporting social-justice work through fundraising. And SEF was like a lab where young people were “changing the face of what it meant to be a fundraiser and to be a philanthropist.”

For one thing, SEF was committed to directly financing the movement—not serving as a tax shelter, as many foundations do, but moving funds directly to “fierce, effective groups that are often under the radar of larger funds,” as they put it.

Adrian Lowe, who came to SEF as an intern while a single parent of a homeschooled child, said: “We made this thing that would move money in the ways money has to move for rich people to file on their taxes, to move real resources to grassroots things that don’t normally get funding – often out-of-pocket organizations for whom a \$500 grant is staggering.” The groups SEF funded were, in SEF’s words, “inspiring models of ideas that could be replicated in almost any community. These groups are pulled together out of inspiration and necessity, rarely with funding or institutional support.”

SEF gave grants without putting the burden of grant-seeking work on the grantees. Max Benitez, who received two grants from SEF (one for an oral-history project during the 2000 U.S. presidential campaign, and one for a documentary about youth and hip-hop activism), loved that with SEF there “wasn’t a lot of paperwork” and that “SEF funded me when I wasn’t able to formulate a way of getting funding from traditional channels.” He “was not affiliated with any kind of organization

– I was at a place of art and activism,” yet SEF was willing to fund him, and without the production requirement typical of individual artists’ grants. “They were allowing me to make mistakes in funding my early mistake-making in my work.” Today, Max works with youth, teaching filmmaking skills and working on media justice and media literacy.

“We took risks that an institution wouldn’t take,” Nepon says, “basically we were a community funding board without the bureaucracy that usually supports community funding boards.”

And the people running the foundation were not typical philanthropists: they were young, and they were not wealthy. They were activists with grassroots connections, while most people in philanthropy are professionals disconnected from the communities they mean to support. Ebrahimi said, “We were a group of people no one would’ve ever thought of as people able to collect that money or make decisions about where that money goes. We were this ragtag team.”

Nepon says, “It was just a group of activists without money doing this thing, an example of youth leadership in an incredibly professionalized and institutionalized field where ‘young’ means under 35. It was amazing and inspiring [to show that] young people who don’t have personal wealth can run a foundation, can support grassroots movement, and this is a part of movement.” In all, over 150 mostly young people supported SEF as donors.

It wasn’t just who they were doing this work, but how they did it. There was a collective decision-making process for grant decisions. And they figured out ways to support organizations that were not formal 501c3 nonprofits. The foundation structure allowed them to receive funds from people who wanted to donate to a 501c3, and then SEF could redirect those funds to non-501c3s. They also established a program through which SEF could serve as a fiscal sponsor of small grassroots organizations with budgets under \$20,000.

All this was an intervention on what we’ve come to call the non-profit industrial complex a decade before INCITE! popularized that term in *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded*. An item on the agenda for an SEF planning retreat reads: “Come up with dream fundraising (as organizing) plan.” It wasn’t just about doing funding differently, but also about seeing funding and fundraising as part of organizing.

Self-Educating at the Self-Education Foundation

The people who started and ran SEF learned how to do it while they did it—making the organization itself a lab for the type of learning they aimed to support.

“I would never encourage someone to start this organization the way we did,” Nepon told me, “but I’m glad we did it.” The cofounders jumped headfirst into creating an organizational framework that could support huge and fast growth. “Getting nonprofit status, doing your own taxes, [and the like are] such burdensome things,” Nepon says. “I don’t think it was necessary to have the level of organizational realness that we created. None of us had ever done that before – we were learning every piece of infrastructure building on the fly – and as if [the organization] was going to be huge. I appreciate that we had that optimism, but it was really unnecessary – we could’ve done more long-range imagining of steps in the process — but I basically learned everything about running nonprofit organizations to some degree because we did all these steps. It was an incredible learning experience for everyone involved.”

Mentorship was integral. Movement elders generously shared organizational-development charts, workbooks, and tips. The Bread and Roses Community Fund lent Nepon Kim Klein's grassroots-fundraising videos. "People came to my crusty anarchist house, sat and talked with me – it was incredible the way that people supported," she said.

The learning happened on a peer level as well. Many of Nepon's housemates were members of ACT UP Philly, and she learned crucial media skills from them. "I was surrounded by people around my age that were starting orgs," Nepon said. "Ordinary people were running these things that were having global implications. [It didn't feel like], Who the hell are you to attempt to have a global impact or shift the conversation in this big way?" In the late '90s, there was a "context of possibility" around social-justice activism, Nepon said. And she thinks that is part of what inspired so many people to share resources with the nascent SEF.

At the same time, she wishes mentors had also asked some critical questions. "I wish people had said to me, 'What's already out there that you can contribute your resources to instead of starting a new thing?'"

Education and Economic Justice Connect

"[T]he more you learn, the more you'll feel compelled to rearrange basic assumptions about everything."

– William Upski Wimsatt, "How I Got My DIY Degree"

How do the two threads of SEF's work—self-education and challenging/re-envisioning philanthropy—connect?

Though SEF didn't explicitly frame itself as an anticapitalist project, many of its organizers saw a connection between self-education and resisting capitalism. As Nepon put it, "I think self-education (by individuals and communities) is a required skill for unlearning the lies told by capitalist/imperialist media, school systems, academia, the non-profit industrial complex, and state agencies. Our ability to survive, resist, transform oppressive systems like capitalism is entirely dependent on our capacity to unlearn the damage those systems have had on us, the limits we've been taught."

Lowe concurs: "Education systems are systems, and they serve the status quo. They reproduce society as it is; that's what they're for. People [can resist] that in a variety of ways – whether it's self-education or going to school and resisting it (as in the student-led school-reform movement in Philly that got some support from SEF) ... cuz not everybody has the resources and family support to not be in school."

Connecting self-education to resource redistribution happened in multiple ways at SEF, from bringing an economic- and racial-justice analysis to the often white-dominated, class-privileged, individualistic world of homeschooling to supporting self-education work in prisons to building new models of grassroots fundraising. But none of that is easy.

Challenges (or, The Political Is Personal, Too)

SEF's vision was huge, and implementing it was complicated and hard work. The organizers were remarkably transparent about their struggles, which feels fitting—they documented and shared

their learning process in newsletter updates and on a substantial Web site, providing resources for others to learn from.

One of the SEF's biggest struggles was dealing with participants' personal, and difficult, relationships with money.

"It was hard to fundraise when all of us had our own pretty serious stuff about money," Lowe said, remembering an instance when some SEF folks went to hear Wimsatt talk about giving money at a private college. Lowe walked out feeling like, "I would've much rather mugged people in the parking lot outside" than participate in asking class-privileged people to give like this. It seemed like "asking for money" was the space where "you have to sell out the radical nature of the work and make it seem less threatening." Today, Lowe thinks that kind of fundraising is "an important part of movements – having people who can translate the important work people are doing into terms [that are accessible to 'donors'] ... it's a skill that's needed if you want to access those resources – at the same time, not everyone is able to do it."

At a certain point, it felt like no one at SEF wanted to do it. "The energy to ask, and the ways you have to frame things to ask, felt really awful," Lowe said. "Fundraising is nasty, and I don't think SEF was able to get away from the ways it's nasty."

Nepon, who had become the default representative of SEF at philanthropy conferences and events for young donors, was feeling isolated. "I was literally having panic attacks in some of these young-donor-organizing spaces ... In donor organizing there's totally people with an anticapitalist agenda – but in the bigger [philanthropy] conferences [it was] horrifying ... ExxonMobil Foundation giving out little oil wells filled with candy – [at one philanthropy conference,] that was the only food I had to eat, in the gift bag for presenters, in a hotel I couldn't afford food in." She struggled with a painful "feeling of class-outsiderness." At the same time, within SEF, she felt perceived as the person who had experience with donor organizing, and with wealthy people, and so she felt uncomfortable when conversations happened like the one where "Adrian told me he'd rather rob people coming out of a fundraising event than beg for money. I think that conversation wouldn't have happened if we'd had a shared theory of grassroots fundraising and the role of people with wealth." All this was particularly painful for Nepon because she is Jewish. She felt she was "perceived as being in the Jewish middle-man position—the anti-Semitic you're the communist/you're the banker bullshit. I don't think it felt that way to others involved. I think they were shocked when I brought up how painful it was to be Jewish in that position."

The group eventually sat down with a facilitator to talk about their individual relationships with money. As Lowe remembers it, they had "intense conversations about tokenism, about what asking for money means to different people." And at one point it ended up with "everybody being like, 'I can't be the one who asks anymore.'" That the group for a long time "could not talk about class with each other," as Nepon put it, was perhaps an inevitable result of living in a capitalist culture that discourages honest discussions about money and our relationships to it. But they eventually did talk about it, "and it turned out," Nepon told me, that "we all had to some degree overlapping mixed-class experiences. I think we all had some amount of class privilege and some amount of experience with the humiliations of poverty. People's own relationship with that was unexplored, which got in the way of solidarity with each other about the way we got money, even though we had shared [values] about the way we redistributed it. ... We were not sharing fundraising/donor relationships collectively, so I think people perceived us as being funded by scary rich people as opposed to the reality, which was that it was mostly a bunch of high-school dropouts and a few people who had wealth and were committed to redistributing it."

All this wasn't just a behind-the-scenes bit of process, but an important part of their work that was documented in an SEF newsletter:

We also had real difficulty talking about our relationships with money and fundraising. Our shared history of being in marginalized communities, and the reality that we're trying to work across lines of race and class privilege, had left us all defensive and careful. As people raised as women, some women of color, and without our own sources of wealth, we were struggling to do effective fundraising and maintain our dignities — to do fundraising and grant making that really challenges institutional racism, sexism, and capitalism. As a solution, we're creating a fundraising plan that lets each of us plug in along our comfort lines — and still get the work done. We brought our vision back into focus and said it: we're doing this work together because we want to bring these movements together and move resources and money to all of them.

“SEF was self-conscious,” Lowe thinks, about the painful class dynamics of movement funding—“which I think is an improvement — a lot of people don't even know that they're tokenizing or exploiting, trying to play people's white guilt or class guilt. SEF was aware, which I think makes it a little bit powerful.”

In Nepon's vision, “Ideally, the movement would be accountable to no government funding, no foundation funding, no individual-wealthy-people funding. Ideally it would be a membership model where everybody gives to their ability, and that's enough — but we live in a different model. Within that, some wealthy people have radical politics and are interested in redistributing [wealth] — although some still have terrible behavior because of their wealth, like, similarly, white people are a problem sometimes, and men. We try to put privileged people to work in the movement understanding that people with the best of intentions can be destructive, and we have to work on that. ... If I were to do [SEF] again, I would want to build up trust and a shared analysis around [fundraising], because it was painful. I've continued to enjoy and pursue grassroots fundraising, but I can't do it in organizations where people don't value the work or get the liberatory politics of it — how it's a form of base-building.”

Onward

In November 2005, SEF announced that they were shutting down. In a letter to their community, Nepon explained:

Why are we shutting down? A couple of reasons. The first is that it was hard work to try to create and fund an organization led entirely by young people. While the philanthropic community talks about wanting to support emerging leaders and new voices, the only grants we received were from other organizations with youth leadership.

SEF was a small foundation. We were run almost entirely by volunteers, and our highest total annual budget (including grantmaking) was under \$35,000.

Even though we did receive nonprofit status, we still functioned much like a grassroots volunteer project. We needed a funding boost to take on more non-profit-style work, and to offer salaries that would free up our time to really do this work ... and that funding wasn't there.

Another reason I personally am ready to step out of this work is that I feel I've aged out. I believe in self-education and youth activism, but I don't think I'm currently suited to speak to those communities' needs or act as a “talent scout” in the way I did when we started the organization.

With so many crises in the world, it has been difficult to build a movement around a long-term strategy. Our mission, misquoting Paulo Freire, says “We believe that self-education is the practice of freedom.” We believe that people who know how to educate themselves are able to gain real information about their world, read between the lines that corporate media and State-directed school systems offer us, and challenge oppressive institutions while building alternatives. With this kind of organizing, it’s hard to demonstrate or prove results. People change, are changed by their learning, slowly and deeply. We can track some of the impacts of SEF’s work, but many of the real successes and challenges lie in the life stories of individuals and may take decades to manifest.

In all, SEF gave over \$30,000 in grants to over 80 organizations, sent four local youth leaders to the 2005 INCITE! Conference, and supported other organizations as a fiscal sponsor.

Even now, SEF is still sharing resources. Their Web site is still up, offering abundant documentation of the organization’s work, and resources for people seeking funds now: <http://www.selfeducation.org/html/grants.html#resources>

The work done, lessons learned, education supported, and visions developed by a group of committed young folks in SEF are still impacting people and movements in many ways—some of which we may not even be able to imagine yet.