Open learning: Schooling and retooling society or deschooling and societal retooling?

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In this paper I seek to resurrect the debate engendered in the 1970s by Ivan Illich's work *Deschooling society* in order to illustrate how open learning strategies can be used to serve diametrically opposed interests. The product of this interplay of interests will have a crucial influence upon the future we generate.

Having broadened the debate about open learning through the inclusion of issues related to deschooling, I shall introduce contemporary analyses of industrial production strategies which could be applied to the higher education sector. In this way I hope to display how a notion of open learning which could all too easily come to be illustrative of what Orwell called "newspeak" can be avoided.

Ivan Illich's work *Deschooling society* was first published in 1971 and, whilst at that time it caused something of a stir amongst theorists of education, it cannot be said to have had a great influence upon policies or practice related to schooling in the Western World. This, I suspect, is a product not simply of institutional inertia, but also of the shift in most of those nations away from the radical agendas of the 1960s, and of the enormously powerful grasp that the dominant notion of the place of children in our societies continues to exert.

Illich's work, not just in *Deschooling society* but also in *Tools for conviviality* and his chapter "Useful unemployment and its professional enemies" in *Toward a history of needs*, provide an apparently disorienting and enormously useful resource for those interested in the opportunities created by a discussion of open learning. Some of his ideas are potentially more influential in the 1990s than they were in the 1970s for reasons to which I will return, but also because an application to adult education may meet with less resistance than arose in relation to children.

At best I shall, with the help of Illich, articulate some niggling doubts which might otherwise remain unexpressed. Ronnie Carr of the Open University in Scotland recently wrote that

> Overall, it is hard to escape the conclusion that there is a major gap between the rhetoric and the reality of "open learning". This is hardly surprising given that it is a catch-all phrase or slogan which can be interpreted in very different ways. (Carr 1990, p.49).

Through this paper I hope to show that this gap between rhetoric and reality provides us with an opportunity which we can ill afford to miss.

What then of Illich and deschooling? A few distinctions, key concepts and quotations will get us underway. Illich distinguishes between what he refers to as skill drills and liberal education and argues that schools are the wrong place for learning skills but are even worse places for getting an education (Illich 1974, p.24-25).

This should encourage us immediately to question a version of open learning which is tied closely to skill development, for the very nature of skills instruction and drill is the antithesis of open learning as understood from a liberal education standpoint. Liberal education relies upon an idea of critical intent which is firmly excluded from drill procedures. A key to an understanding of Illich's perspective is provided by the following quotation.

> This transfer of responsibility from self to institution guarantees social regression, especially once
it has been accepted as an obligation. (Illich 1974, p.45).

How open in these terms will training packages be? How much choice will employees have? Will non employees be able to gain access? Listen to Illich on the myth of packaging values and remember that he was writing in the early 1970s.

School sells curriculum - a bundle of goods made according to the same process and having the same structure as other merchandise. Curriculum production for most schools begins with allegedly scientific research, on whose basis educational engineers predict future demand and tools for the assembly line, within the limits set by budgets and taboos. The distributor-teacher delivers the finished product to the consumer-pupil, whose reactions are carefully studied and charted to provide research data for the preparation of the next model, which may be 'ungraded' 'student-designed', 'team-taught', 'visually-aided' or 'issue-centred'.

The result of the curriculum production process looks like any other modern staple. It is a bundle of planned meanings, a package of values, a commodity whose 'balanced appeal' makes it marketable to a sufficiently large number to justify the cost of production. Consumer-pupils are taught to make their desires conform to marketable values. Thus they are made to feel guilty if they do not behave according to the predictions of consumer research by getting the grades and certificates that will place them in the job category they have been led to expect. (Illich 1974, p.46).

Can such a statement be heard without hearing its relevance to contemporary debate about distance education methods and open learning? Illich argues that

Schools themselves pervert the natural inclination to grow and learn into the demand for instruction. Demands for manufactured maturity is a far greater abnegation of self-initiated activity than the demand for manufactured goods. (Illich 1974, p.65).

Listen to Illich on growth and consider this in relation to increasingly clearly articulated arguments about the importance of reorganising the limits of global resources.

School programmes hunger for progressive intake of instruction, but even if the hunger leads to steady absorption, it never yields the joy of knowing something to one's satisfaction. Each subject comes packaged with the instruction to go on consuming one 'offering' after another, and last year's wrapping is always obsolete for this year's consumer. The textbook racket builds on this demand. Educational reformers promise each new generation the latest and the best, and the public is schooled into demanding what they offer. Both the dropout who is forever reminded of what he missed and the graduate who is made to feel inferior to the new breed of student know exactly where they stand in the ritual of rising deceptions and continue to support a society which euphemistically calls the widening frustration gap a 'revolution of rising expectations'.

But growth conceived as open-ended consumption - eternal progress - can never lead to maturity. (Illich 1974, p.47-48).

Before going any further I must address a possible objection that Illich is talking about the schooling of children whereas this conference is oriented entirely towards adults. My response to this is that current government policy on higher education is, through efforts to separate conception from execution, course preparation from course delivery, together with funding strategies directing the activity within previously ostensibly autonomous institutions towards the government's perception of the national interest, doing a great deal to reduce any distinctions between schools and institutions of higher education.

Indeed the blurring of the boundaries which this conference represents could easily result in a similar consequence, ie an extension of schooling well beyond its previous boundaries. My contention is that this blurring provides the space which could equally well lead to a diminution of the importance of schooling in favour of more democratic, flexible, interesting and importantly more productive learning opportunities, but
Illich points to the extension option in the following statement.

Now the teacher-therapists go on to propose life-long educational treatment as the next step. The style of this treatment is under discussion: Should it take the form of continued adult classroom attendance? Electronic ecstasy? Or periodic sensitivity sessions? All educators are ready to conspire to push out the walls of the classroom, with the goal of transforming the entire culture into a school. (Illich 1974, p.72-73).

He argues that

School has become the world religion of a modernized proletariat, and makes futile promises of salvation to the poor of the technological age. The nation-state has adopted it, drafting all citizens into a graded curriculum leading to sequential diplomas not unlike the initiation rituals and hieratic promotions of former times. (Illich 1974, p.18).

Later he states that

The American university has become the final stage of the most all-encompassing initiation rite the world has ever known. No society in history has been able to survive without ritual or myth, but ours is the first which has needed such a dull, protracted, destructive and expensive initiation into its myth. The contemporary world civilization is also the first one which has found it necessary to rationalize its fundamental initiation ritual in the name of education. We cannot begin a reform of education unless we first understand that neither individual learning nor social equality can be enhanced by the ritual of schooling. (Illich 1974, p.43).

I may not be collecting and articulating these issues lucidly and clearly, but as Illich says

If we do not challenge the assumption that valuable knowledge is a commodity which under certain circumstances may be forced into the consumer, society will increasingly be dominated by sinister pseudo schools and totalitarian managers of information. Increasingly larger numbers of bureaucrats will presume to pose as teachers. The language of the schoolman has already been coopted by the adman. Now the general and the policeman try to dignify their professions by masquerading as educators. (Illich 1974, p.54).

Before shifting to an optimistic version of the opportunities available to us, I must mention one of the core concepts used by Illich. This is the idea of the hidden curriculum. He states that

The hidden curriculum of family life, draft, health care, so-called professionalism, or of the media play an important part in the institutional manipulation of man's (sic) world - vision, language and demands. But school enslaves more profoundly and more systematically, since only school is credited with the principal function of forming critical judgement, and, paradoxically, tries to do so by making learning about oneself, about others, and about nature depend on a prepackaged process. (Illich 1974, p.52).

Elizabeth Vallance in her article "Hiding the Hidden Curriculum", when discussing characteristics of education in the late nineteenth century, states that

The language of production, economic models, and bureaucratic skills came to dominate the educational reform movements that had the greatest effect on schooling at the time. The rationale for change shifted from moralism to functionalism. (Vallance 1983, p.20).

In relation to opportunities generated by an optimistic reading of these trends, Illich argues

The movement of our society from the present - in which all institutions gravitate towards post-industrial bureaucracy - to a future of post-industrial conviviality - in which the intensity of action would prevail over production - must begin with a renewal of style in the service
institutions - and, first of all, with a renewal of education. A future which is desirable and feasible depends on our willingness to invest our technological know-how into the growth of convivial institutions. In the field of educational research, this amounts to the request for a reversal of present trends. (Illich 1974, p.68).

The point is, as he says, that the - "Technology is available to develop either independence and learning or bureaucracy and teaching." (Illich 1974, p.80).

In essence then most of the skills specific topics at this conference are examples of flexible approaches to teaching but they are not open learning. Note what Illich had to say 20 years ago about computers and bulletin boards!

A complement to the computer could be a network of bulletin boards and classified newspaper ads, listing the activities for which the computer could not produce a match. No names would have to be given. Interested readers would then introduce their names into the system. A publicly supported peer-match network might be the only way to guarantee the right of free assembly and to train people in the exercise of this most fundamental civic activity. (Illich 1974, p.95).

Earlier I mentioned convivial institutions and this provides us with a route into a brief consideration of a few ideas from Tools for Conviviality. Here Illich argues that

To translate the theoretical possibility of a postindustrial convivial life style into a political program for new tools, it must soon be shown that the prevailing fundamental structure of our present tools menaces the survival of mankind. It must be shown that this menace is imminent and that the effects of compulsive efficiency do more damage than good to most people in our generation. For this purpose we must identify the range within which our present institutions have become frustrating, and we must recognize another range within which our tools become destructive of society as a whole. (Illich 1973, p.45).

Two watersheds are identified, in the first institutions become frustrating and in the second they become destructive. An example of the first might be a traffic jam and of the second might be the depletion of the ozone layer. The key point is that more of the same, even if produced at a reduced cost, isn't always a way out of trouble. In fact it may increase the trouble. However as Illich says "While evidence shows that more of the same leads to utter defeat, nothing less than more and more seems worthwhile in a society infected by the growth mania." (Illich 1973, p.8). Here then he is talking not only about education for he states that

The use of industrial tools stamps in an identical way the landscape of cities each having its own history and culture. Highways, hospital wards, classrooms, office buildings, apartments, and stores look everywhere the same. Identical tools also promote the development of the same character types. Policemen in patrol cars or accountants at computers look and act alike all over the world, while their poor cousins using nightstick or pen are different from region to region. The progressive homogenization of personalities and personal relationships cannot be stemmed without a retooling of society. (Illich 1973, p.15).

So deschooling becomes just one example of societal retooling which involves a shift from industrial to convivial tools. Such retooling is needed for the current direction is seen to be presented in the following remark

The alchemist's dream of making a homunculus in the test tube slowly took the shape of creating robots to work for man, and to educate men to work alongside them. (Illich 1973, p.30).

The latter scenario is reflected also in the following.

This unqualified identification of scientific advance with the replacement of human initiative by programmed tools springs from an ideological prejudice and is not the result of scientific
analysis. Science could be applied for precisely the opposite purpose. Advanced or "high" technology could become identified with labor-sparing, work-intensive decentralized productivity. Natural and social science can be used for the creation of tools, utilities, and rules available to everyone, permitting individuals and transient associations to constantly recreate their mutual relationships and their environment with unenvisaged freedom and self-expression. (Illich 1973, p.33-34).

Note that Illich distinguishes between work and labour (employment) here and this distinction will be returned to later. He articulates this in a more succinct way in the following sentence which also lead me into a brief consideration of his chapter entitled "Useful unemployment and its professional enemies".

The knowledge-capitalism of professional imperialism subjugates people more imperceptibly than and as effectively as international finance or weaponry (Illich 1973, p.43).

His critique of the professional, of people like us, commences as follows

I propose to call the mid-twentieth century the Age of Disabling Professions. I choose this designation because it commits those who use it. It exposes the anti-social functions performed by the least challenged providers - educators, physicians, social workers, and scientists. Simultaneously, it indict the complacency of citizens who have submitted themselves to multifaceted bondage as clients. To speak about the power of disabling professions shames their victims into recognizing the conspiracy of the lifelong student, gynaecological case, or consumer, each with his or her manager. By describing the sixties as an apogee of the problem-solver, one immediately exposes both the inflated conceit of our academic elites and the greedy gullibility of their victims. (Illich 1978, p.16-17).

He also mocks the team approach.

Finally, the client is trained to need a team approach to receive what his guardians consider "satisfactory treatment" . . . Already in kindergarten, the child is subjected to management by a team made up of such specialists as the allergist, speech pathologist, pediatrician, child psychologist, social worker, physical-education instruction, and teacher. By forming such a pedocratic team, many different professionals attempt to share the time that has become the major limiting factor to the imputation of further needs. For the adult, it is not the school but the workplace where the packaging of services focuses. The personnel manager, labour educator, in-service trainer, insurance planner, consciousness-raiser find it more profitable to share the client. (Illich 1978, p.33-34).

Incidentally Johnathon Bradshaw's typology of needs where he distinguished between expressed need, felt need, normative need, and comparative need could provide some conceptual leverage in this debate. (Bradshaw 1977, p.33-34).

Illich displays in the following statement how professional groups in effect monopolise provision.

Educators and doctors and social workers today - as did priests and lawyers formerly - gain legal power to create the need that, by law, they alone will be allowed to serve. They turn the modern state into a holding corporation of enterprises that facilitate the operation of their self-certified competencies. (Illich 1978, p.23).

He also offers an account of one of the processes which encouraged dependence upon the professionals. An account which is of some relevance to my particular argument today.

Professions could not have become dominant and disabling unless people had been ready to experience as a lack that which the expert imputed to them as a need. Their mutual dependence as tutor and charge has become resistant to analysis because it has been obscured by corrupted language. Good old words have been made into branding irons that claim wardship for experts over home, shop, store, and the space or ether between them. Language, the most
fundamental of commons, is thus polluted by twisted strands of jargon, each under the control of another profession. (Illich 1978, p.29).

By now I would hope that through reference to Illich's work I have at least illustrated that an easy and comfortable acceptance of the version of open learning related to industrial training might be far from wise. Orwell in 1984 in the Appendix on "Newspeak" says that "Newspeak was designed not to extend but to diminish the range of thought" (Orwell 1975, p.242). If we allow the concept of open learning to be closely associated with industrial training then we will have lost the opportunity that this blurring of boundaries provides. This will be all the more foolish a loss at the beginning of the 1990 for much in the industrial arena is changing or could change as the Fordist paradigm which has dominated most of the century is increasingly brought into question and post Fordist possibilities are realistically placed on the agenda. To quote from Mathews’ A Culture of Power

At last, the labor movement has history and economics on its side. The condition that will determine whether firms will be able to stay in highly competitive markets in the future is that they have a flexible, highly skilled, responsible and democratically organised workforce which collectively, through its unions, co-determines with management how the work will be done. Industrial Democracy has become a matter of economic survival. (Mathews 1988, p.20).

The conceptual framework implicitly referred to here is that grounded in the distinction between Fordist and post Fordist production processes. The former, which has dominated through most of the last century was grounded in a de-skilling of the workforce and a relocation of conceptual activities as opposed to execution activities with management. Once this is remembered the current talk of multi skilling is perhaps heard in a different light. Whilst this conceptual map does not match the issues raised in relation to deschooling in a totally tidy way, more useful connections arise than was the case in relation to the Fordist era.

The following extract from Knights et al (1985, p.15) says something of the Fordist era.

Associated with the new fixed-speed moving assembly lines were an accelerated division of labour and short task-cycle times. Ford pushed job fragmentation to an extreme. For example in 1922, Henry Ford records a survey of jobs in his plants:

The lightest jobs were again classified to discover how many of them required the use of full faculties, and we found that 670 could be filled by legless men, 2637 by one-legged men, two by armless men, 715 by one-armed men, and ten by blind men. Therefore, out of 7882 kinds of job...4034 did not require full physical capacity. (Ford 1922: 108)

The differences between Fordist, post Fordist and neo Fordist approaches are intimated in the following distinctions drawn from the recent work of Badham and Mathews (1990, p.207).

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What I am claiming is that the ideas of Illich may have greater relevance and the possibility of serious consideration in a period when the Fordist paradigm is at least brought into question. A separate, but related point relates to the distinction between work and labour (employment) mentioned earlier, for clearly the two terms are not equivalent for much work is done outside employment and, indeed as levels of productivity rise, so it is likely that less employment will be generated. This requires us to take seriously various different views of the future. The following scenarios, as delineated by A G Watts (1983) can assist us here.
a. **An unemployment scenario.** Essentially this is a continuation or worsening of the current situation where unemployment levels remain high or go even higher and dominant social attitudes continue to blame the unemployed for their predicament (p.119).

b. **A leisure scenario.** As in (a) large numbers are in unemployment but a change of attitude has occurred and the unemployed are now perceived as a new leisure class since as a result of advances in technology employment is no longer necessary (p.130).

c. **An employment scenario.** Access to employment is treated as a right and various forms of work sharing and employment creation are the norm. This scenario would involve structural changes in relation to the distribution of wealth and power (p.150).

d. **A work scenario.** Work outside employment is revalued in such a way that the informal economies i.e. the black economy, the communal economy and the family economy are no longer denigrated. This would involve substantial changes in the current relations between the formal and informal economies, the current division of labour on the basis of sex-roles would require revision (p.169).

Watts speaks of the work scenario in more favourable terms than either the employment, unemployment or leisure scenarios and, if we move on from this to its potential impact on education we see an alternative version of open learning arising which does in most regards share common orientations with the deschooling proposals of Illich.

| From education as narrowly preparing for vocational and other slots with little concern for developing a critical social awareness | To educate as a broad preparation for life, including social understanding and awareness, and social criticism |
| From education as a discrete experience, probably within and end on to schooling | To education as a continuous life long process of learning |
| From education as based on limited access, rather than choice by individuals | To education as based on open access, widely available in varied forms, within which choices can be made |
| From education as a determinant of life chances from an early age, on a basis which largely reproduces existing differentials and inequalities | To educate as a catalyst for social mobility throughout life |
| From education as the prerogative of professionals based within the formal education institutions | To education as a task shared by and sometimes led by non professional educators |
| From education as a centralised activity based on core curricula and centrally controlled standards | To education as a decentralised activity with curricula which are negotiated and evaluated locally |


Finally, Carr in the article referred to at the outset, quotes from Lewis who argues that

Open learning is when decisions about learning are taken by the learner or learners themselves. These decisions may be over a number of different aspects of the learning process, including: whether or not to learn, what to learn, how to learn, where to learn, when to learn, who to turn to for help, how to get learning assessed, what to do next. (Carr 1990, p.49).

It seems to me that those concerned with industrial training would have a hard time claiming their process to be open learning on any single one of those criteria, but if the availability of choice on all aspects is seen to be a prerequisite then their task is so much the harder.
Endnote

The question of "deschooling or reschooling" was first drawn to my attention by Frankel (1987, p.168-176).

References


