

Deschooling Society:

Re-Examining Ivan Illich's Contributions to Critical Pedagogy for 21st Century

Curriculum Theory

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June, 6, 2012

Abstract

This paper re-examines Ivan Illich's ideas as expressed in his seminal work *Deschooling Society* from a 21st century point of view. It explores the validity of his ideas for our current education system. Illich's work was published at the time of a paradigm shift in curriculum theory which resulted in the development of Reconceptualization and Reproduction Theory. Therefore, the paper examines Illich's influence on Critical Pedagogy as the major theory of this paradigm shift. The purpose of this paper is to determine which aspects of *Deschooling Society* and Critical Pedagogy are useful for curriculum theory today and how they can be applied. The methodology used is theoretical analysis. The findings will show that all of Illich's concerns are still valid today, some so with increased urgency. However, they cannot be remedied today in the ways suggested by Illich when the work was originally published. The paper concludes by applying Illich's underlying notions of humanism and responsibility for oneself and others to curriculum theory today.

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The Institution School

It seems the longer we try to improve the great American education system and the more resources we spend in an attempt to “fix” it, the more inadequate it becomes. This subjective comparative is used here based on the measure of how contended its major agents, namely students and teachers are. From its early beginnings of meritocracy to a decade of No Child Left Behind almost two centuries later, we have neither been successful at allowing teachers to feel that they can accomplish what they set out for nor do students seem to acquire the skills necessary to find contentment in life. It is an indisputable fact that the more years a child spends in school, the more likely she is to say “I don't wanna go to school!”

But isn't school the place where children find the answers for all those questions they've been wondering about like why you cannot unscramble an egg or the sky is blue? It appears that their questions never really get asked because it is not up to them what is taught in schools even though they're the object of the game and the main players.

And yet, we continue to send our children there in the race for diplomas, certificates and credentials because it is through those that we are validated. My pre-service teachers, when asked why they want to join the profession, more often than not answer that they want to impact the life of that one child by saving her from oblivion through means of education. The truth is they're probably somewhat successful in saving her, not through education but by helping her to receive a diploma like Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*.

But if diplomas don't represent knowledge and questions don't get answered, then what is the purpose of education? Clearly, school is one of the most influential institutions in passing society from one generation to the next, so it seems important to wonder what its effects on society are. Proponents of Reproduction Theory would answer that the purpose of the institution school is the reproduction of the dominant class. This is accomplished by legitimizing and challenging "modes of self-representation, self-image, and social class identification which are the crucial ingredients for job adequacy" (Bowles and Gintis in Pinar et al., 1995, p. 245).

But as long as we stratify the education system in accordance with the stratification of society, central to which is the economy, when we use affirmative action to determine who gets accepted into universities, when we create phenomena like a Hispanic scholarship fund, we undergird the marginalization of certain groups as these practices are not directed to empower the members of those groups but to afford them a chance to join the dominant class.

Critical Pedagogy

Reproduction Theory occurred as an effect of Reconceptualization, a major paradigm shift in the early 1970s during which the focus of curriculum research shifted from curriculum development to understanding curriculum (Pinar et al., 1995).

The most influential theory born out of this paradigm shift is Critical Pedagogy. Its most noted proponent, Paulo Freire, understood the goal of Critical Pedagogy in liberating marginalized groups of society from oppression. Contemporary scholars like Michael Apple, Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren continue Freire's work to promote social justice by asking "students to become critical agents who actively question and negotiate ... deep-seated

assumptions and myths that legitimate the most archaic and disempowering social practices” (McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007, p.2).

But to what outcome, one might wonder? Obviously the goal of Critical Pedagogy cannot be to enable the oppressed to simply join the ranks of the elite. What’s the alternative? A society where all classes are equal, such as socialism, or even a classless society like communism? That’s unrealistic and quite undesirable might I add having grown up in East Germany. It appears that the relevancy of Critical Pedagogy in the 21st century lies in its potential to realize that we have raised a generation of obedient, compliant people who follow rules without ever questioning whether their obedience interferes with their morality or values. Once we understand that, we can attempt to help our children, our contemporaries and ourselves to take responsibility for our actions by beginning to question where our values and morals originate and whether they are conducive to self-actualize in Maslow’s sense (Simmons et al., 1987).

Ivan Illich

At a time when Reconceptualization and Critical Pedagogy were still in their infancy, the Austrian philosopher and priest Ivan Illich saw the only hope for society in deschooling it. He feared that any desire for self-actualization had been replaced by “demands for scientifically produced commodities” (Illich, 1971, p. 3) which determine a person’s level of wealth/poverty. The basic commodity is the number of years a person has spent in school. Based on that number, he is able to acquire other commodities of which school has convinced him that they are absolutely necessary, all of which pertain to material wealth. The goal of school, and this is true

for any institution, is to get hooked on it, dividing society into inferior and superior members for the purpose of justifying the institution's continuous existence.

This has never been truer than today: Any reforms proposed by educational researchers and the government alike have the goal to advance the country's economy in order to reestablish its leading position in the world. In his 2010 Back-to-School-Speech, President Obama said: "... at a time when other countries are competing with us like never before; when students around the world are working harder than ever, and doing better than ever; your success in school will also help determine America's success in the 21st century" (Obama, 2010).

But why is that not a deserving goal, one might ask? Illich (1971) refuses it as such because it turns children into natural resources to be fed into the "industrial machine" (p. 66). While the proponents of Critical Pedagogy count Illich among their ranks, it is conceivable that he would, at least partially, distance himself as they seem to have the same goal, namely to empower children, through applied Critical Pedagogy in schools, to acquire the commodity that will eventually enable them to overcome their marginalization in society. Illich (1971) says "Even the seemingly radical critics of the school system are not willing to abandon the idea that they have an obligation ... to process them, whether by love or by fear, into a society ... which puts economic growth first" (p. 67).

I share Illich's vehement rejection of that purpose of school as it is in direct opposition to what Foucault considers a basic freedom, namely the understanding of self to be able to choose one action, and not another (O'Farrell, 2007). Both would likely agree with Sir Ken Robinson's demand that children should find out who they are, what they are passionate about, and what

authenticates them (Robinson, 2010). It can be assumed, however, that Illich would disagree with Robinson in that this can be accomplished through schools.

Illich (1971) insists that the only way to learn anything at all is through “incidental or informal education” (p. 22). This is a very interesting idea because most of what we learn in schools does not pertain to subject matter but to socialization and values as dictated through the hidden curriculum by the dominant class (Apple, 1990). The things we have learned, we did learn through experience and needs; therefore, I want to argue that schools should provide such opportunities as suggested by Rousseau and Dewey (Cremin, 1959). But Illich disagrees. He (Illich, 1971) calls Dewey’s progressivism, which provides real-world experiences, “the pacification of the new generation within specifically engineered enclaves which will seduce them into the dream world of their elders” (p. 66). He extends the metaphor to the idea of Free Schools as they, too, make all valuable learning dependent on institutionalized teaching. This is the commonality between Illich and the critical pedagogues based on which they count him among their proponents.

Very interesting is his comparison of learning in the village where everybody provided his services as needed and was therefore meaningful to his community. Illich (1971) says “modern man must find meaning in many structures to which he is only marginally related” (p. 22). This is truer even more today, 40 years later. Should it then not be the responsibility of school to enable students to find that meaning for themselves, I wonder?

But Illich (1971) doubts that the education system is anything other than a mechanism to “break the integrity of an entire population and make it plastic material for the teachings” (p. 50). It seems the underlying philosophy that connects both, Illich and scholars like McLaren,

Kincheloe and Apple, is that all see how men “shield themselves ... behind certificates acquired in school” and want to use the institution to revolt against itself by pointing out its deficiencies hoping that its members “gain in courage to talk back and thereby control and instruct the institutions they participate in” (Illich, 1971, p. 23).

While this is precisely the purpose of Critical Pedagogy, for Illich, it feels like a discrepancy in his logic. I share his apprehension of institutions in general, which, by their very nature, are structured hierarchies that leave no room for the complexities of individual freedom and are, by definition, self-justifying and manipulative. He (Illich, 1971) points out the difference between the “Biblical message and institutionalized religion” and says that “Christian freedom and faith usually gain from secularization” (p. 24) thereby making a point for deschooling society. But then he (Illich, 1971) says that “the deschooling of education depends on the leadership of those brought up in schools” because “each of us remains responsible for what has been made of him” (p. 24).

When reading *Deschooling Society*, I am left with the impression that Illich actually wants to deinstitutionalize society. He brings many examples of society’s regression caused by other institutions such as the one of medical care, the Army, or the system of highways and cars, all of which turn us into active members of a society focused on growth and consumption. We can add to that today’s media such as the NFL or TV with shows that “educate” us about aesthetics, epistemology and metaphysics by telling us what is considered beautiful, important, desirable, etc. I am referring to programs such as *Oprah* (including her book club), *Hanna Montana* or *American Idol*. And yet, the above quote seems to make an argument against this impression. However, I do not feel he had in mind what Freire said when he insisted “that it is a

political imperative for critical educators to develop a strong command of their particular academic discipline” because “by doing so, they can competently teach the ‘official transcript’ of their field while simultaneously creating opportunities for students to engage critically in classroom content” (Darder et al., 2003, p. 20). When Illich calls upon the “educators brought up in school” as the leaders to deschool society, it appears that he actually refers to those who, not because of but despite of school, understand its deficiencies. If this were so, he would make an argument for the deinstitutionalization of society and against Critical Pedagogy thereby following his original logic.

One of the most important points Illich (1971) makes is that it is the “transfer of responsibility from self to institution” that guarantees social regression (p. 39). Here he seems to agree with Hegel who says that the ultimate goal of education is the freedom of the individual which includes his in/dependence on institutions. By freedom I believe Hegel means the ability to make the conscious decision to be part of or to distance oneself from an institution. However, in order to make that decision, one has to have undergone the contradictions and conflicts during which one discovers oneself. It is these contradictions and conflicts that are one’s impetus and which will be integrated to reach a higher level. Based on that, Hegel would think the purpose of school is to discover oneself (Hegel, 1841).

The goal then should not be to deinstitutionalize society thereby removing all conflicts arising through the demagoguery of schools, but to enable learners to see the institution for what it is. If they understand it as a manipulative mechanism whose goal it is to create compliant citizen who do not raise questions regarding ethics, epistemology, or metaphysics but instead

further the influence of the dominant class by advancing its economic strength, learners should be empowered to devise strategies to change that.

However, this cannot be done by deschooling society but only through applied Critical Pedagogy which affords learners to understand what it means to be a critical agent.

Illich refers to Freire who taught Brazilian farmers how to read with the help of words that had political meaning which the men could relate to (Illich, 1971). Based on that, Illich (1971) developed what he later called “The General Characteristics of New Formal Educational Institutions” (p. 75). It is very interesting that he should use the words *formal* and *institutions*. This seems to indicate quite clearly that he wants to neither deinstitutionalize nor deschool society. What he proposes is a different approach to education all together while keeping the institution of it as an overall systemic characteristic intact.

How does Illich picture this new “institution?” First he distinguishes between “convivial” institutions, which are those that “do.” They are characterized by being taken advantage of spontaneously, e.g. subway lines, the sewage system, parks, etc., which we use without “having to be institutionally convinced that it is to (our) advantage to do so” (Illich, 1971, p. 54 f). He places those on the left side of a spectrum on the opposing end of which he puts “manipulative” institutions, which are those that “make” and whose “rules progressively call for unwilling consumption and production” such as the Church, the Army, etc. (Illich, 1971, p. 55).

Looking at the lack of enthusiasm and trust among teachers and students in schools today as described earlier, I whole-heartedly agree with Illich in placing our current education system

on the far right end of his spectrum. So how does he suggest we turn schools into “convivial” institutions?

Illich (1971) looks at four main approaches, the first one of which is the “Reference Service to Educational Objects” (p. 79 ff). He (Illich, 1971) criticizes that “educational materials have been monopolized by school” (p. 80). Those are objects such as microscopes, labs, or the autopsy dummy that taunts my daughter on a daily basis in her health class because she knows she’ll probably never get to examine it due to the infinite number of handouts she’ll continue to complete for the rest of the year. Illich envisions laboratories, photo labs and tool shops where interested students could observe and engage. It is important to note that he does not refer here to those available to students in vocational tracks as they pertain to school as a “protagonist of social control” (Illich, 1971, p. 66).

Illich illustrates the “Reference Service to Educational Objects” with the example of a friend who brought a pair of dice to the market with which he taught volunteers rules of semantics. While some children enjoyed the educational game and benefitted from it, others walked away.

This is a fundamental concern in Illich’s concept of deschooling society: Why did they leave? Did they understand too little of the concept to be curious? Or had they heard of semantics before and considered it boring? Should we ask them to stay? It can be concluded that Illich would object. If so, his approach might work only for highly motivated students but might not be effective for those children we label “disadvantaged.”

One of the purposes of school must be to allow children to learn enough about themselves and an idea to decide whether it is worthy of finding out more about or whether it does not interest them.

I often see my students “walk away.” After having aroused their curiosity towards a particular idea, I see them never returning to it unless prompted by homework assignments to be rewarded/punished with a grade. I doubt they don’t pursue it because of their ignorance. Rather, I believe they are overwhelmed with the requirements school puts before them in order to acquire their certificate. Therefore, they have to prioritize and lack the leisure to find out more about that initially interesting idea. Now, if we gave students a choice of what we ought to require of them based on their interests, would they be more engaged or would they spend their time following the beckoning of “manipulative” institutions such as the mall? I think Illich would not only entrust students to entertain their curiosity but also to know what concerns them based on their lives’ circumstances. His purpose of deschooling society is that students regain the ability and the courage to ask questions and voice concerns. If we successfully transform school into a “convivial” institution, students, by definition, would enjoy engaging in it.

The second of Illich’s four approaches to accomplish that goal is “Skill Exchanges.” Based on his idea that “education for all means education by all,” (Illich, 1971, p. 22) those that possess a skill and are willing to demonstrate it do so either in person or through film and tape recordings which are available to everyone interested in acquiring that particular skill. With that, Illich was truly a visionary because what he describes is the availability of immeasurable learning and sharing opportunities through the World Wide Web, which has a name he would surely approve of. He (Illich, 1971) also notes that “converging self-interests now conspire to

stop a man from sharing his skill,” (p. 89) which still seems to be a problem 40 years later.

While some share, other are concerned with being accredited for an idea as it is fundamental for receiving certain credentials. The former are those whose position in society is relatively stable, maybe tenured professors, while the latter are those who have not yet acquired that status and the economic security it represents. It appears that in Illich’s vision we would not need words to describe *plagiarism* or *copy rights* anymore.

However, in his third approach, which he calls “Peer-Matching,” he suggests what I perceive as a detrimental restriction to his entire theory: He (Illich, 1971) proposes that “access to a ‘class’ would be free – or purchased with educational vouchers” (p. 94), which one would earn based on the number of hours one has spent teaching a skill and “the number of pupils (one) could attract for any full two-year period” (p. 94). This seems like a sort of merit pay that contains the danger of moving school as a “convivial” institution away from the left side of the spectrum to the far right among the “manipulative” institutions. A “teacher’s” focus might shift away from voluntarily sharing a skill to earning vouchers because it will allow him to learn more himself. This would not only have a pernicious effect on the quality of his “teaching” as intrinsic motivation gives way to extrinsic motivation (Pink, 2009), but he might spend his energy and resources on advertising himself. This exemplifies the observation made by Illich’s Mexican friend “that stores sold ‘only wares heavily made up with cosmetics.’” Illich (1971) criticizes that products speak “about their allurements not their nature” for the purpose of consumption (p. 80). But under these circumstances skill sharing would become such a product. Moreover, it begs the question of who’s to decide how many pupils a teacher has to attract and hours to teach in order to earn the “educational vouchers” that allow him to learn, let’s say, what a PhD program might offer?

And finally, knowledge once again would have a price. This way these restrictions would seriously endanger the system's literal conviviality.

In some aspects the way Illich sees the world is reminiscent of Newtonian linearity instead of its complexity and chaos. Throughout his work, he correctly observes that the more we progress or produce, the less happy we are. He cites examples such as the poverty program which produces more poor, medicine that increases survival thereby blowing up the population to the point where we are running out of resources, and a consumer society that always wants more than it needs. That's correct, but it seems his idea of resolving these issues consists in their restriction. For example, he proposes to limit the power of cars because we do not really need them to go faster and faster and to limit their number as they congest New York City. Cars have certainly contributed more than their fair share to environment pollution and the decline of health among those living in urban communities, but to restrict them is a linear approach to resolve a complex problem. Chaos theory tells us about the bifurcations that occur at critical points in an open system. To restrict the system is to disallow it to live its life, which it will do only as long as it receives positive feedback. Once it receives negative feedback (without the connotation the word usually implies), it changes its course naturally in the process of self-organization in order to reach equilibrium on a higher level (Gleick, 1987). We cannot stop evolving because we fear that our evolution might have detrimental effects. As an open system, we should be able to self-organize in order to reach a new equilibrium. Is that not what Hegel's dialectic implies?

In fact, it seems that this is what Illich demands from the members of a deschooled society: We need not be manipulated into agreeing what is good and important for us; guided by

our natural interests and concerns, we can well decide that for ourselves. If we are not restricted that way, we self-organize and reach our new, higher equilibrium.

Illich's fourth and final approach pertains to "Professional Educators." He describes how our choices in learning will increase both our independence and our need for guidance. This will express itself in the removal of the line between the teacher, previously presented as an omnipotent superior, and the learner as both enrich one another. He (Illich, 1971) says "What is common to all true master-pupil relationships is the awareness both share that their relationship is literally priceless and in very different ways a privilege for both" (p. 100).

Here he envisions how the first three approaches culminate in our desire and ability for mastery, purpose and autonomy (Pink, 2009). It is only in his fourth approach that he describes the need for pedagogy and intellectual leadership thereby clarifying that his learning webs are not composed haphazardly employing people who are mediocre in their field. With systemic manipulation replaced by the guidance of those who are wiser than we on our self-chosen path to "responsible educational independence" (Illich, 1971, p. 97), Illich employs all the best elements of Critical Pedagogy whose final goal I understand to be the sovereignty of the mind.

Conclusions

From the point of view of the 21st century, *Deschooling Society* can be considered the work of a brilliant visionary who was concerned for his contemporaries and their future. His ideas are invaluable contributions to Critical Pedagogy, which, without Illich, might not have developed into the substantial theory of understanding curriculum that it is today. Illich's

approach to resolving the problems our society has created for itself show his deep respect and trust in humanity and its ability to be free.

At the end of his work, Illich leaves us with a quote from Yevgeny Yevtushenko's poem "People." It is one of my favorite poems which I memorized when I was 21, and it has been my steady companion for the past 22 years. In it, Yevtushenko tells us that there are no uninteresting people in this world because everyone carries a unique, secret world in him. Illich tells us that the ultimate goal and the means to its accomplishment is the respect humans must have for one another. This respect can only be realized if we allow people to be and to become, which includes to allow and to entrust them to make autonomous decisions. It is the only way we can live life with integrity. It is these basic ideas of the humanistic responsibility one human being should have for another that must be the foundation for curriculum theory in the globalness of the 21st century.

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