Deschooling Virtuality 2.0

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Introduction

Back in early 1970s, radical thinkers including Ivan Illich (1971), Everett Reimer (1971), and Paul Goodman (1973) criticised institutional schools and called for their abandonment. For many of these thinkers, deschooling was just a distant and vague dream. For Ivan Illich, however, it was a viable alternative (Atasay, 2013: 58). Admittedly, Illich's alternative was based on a utopian technical infrastructure. However, as information technologies have advanced to a stage where they are surprisingly close to Illich's imagined infrastructure, his works have started to attract renewed interest from contemporary thinkers in diverse fields from technology (Hart, 2001; Jandrić, 2010) to pedagogy (Hern, 1998).

This paper reconciles technological and pedagogical aspects of Ivan Illich's deschooling. The first part briefly introduces conclusions developed in my recent article 'Deschooling virtuality' (2014), which explores contemporary potentials for deschooling. In conversation with some of today's leading thinkers, the second part inquires what should be done with the identified potentials.

Deschooling virtuality

Illich shows that modern society rapidly institutionalizes natural human functions. "Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, the rat race for productive work" (Illich, 1971: 3). Institutionalized society is dialectically intertwined with institutionalized education. "The pupil is thereby 'schooled' to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new" (ibid). Using static models of educational 'delivery', schools are reduced to commodities and thus

dehumanized. Institutionalized society based on permanent economic growth is ecologically unsustainable. Institutionalized schools are intrinsic parts of this problem, and therefore unable to offer viable solutions. According to Illich, a possible way out of this vicious circle is radical deschooling.

In order to replace traditional schools, Illich proposes a large-scale non-institutional educational infrastructure which consists of four interlocking educational networks: reference services to educational objects, skill exchanges, peer-matching and reference services to educators-at-large (Illich, 1971). There is a growing body of research showing that Illich's infrastructure is almost fully embodied in the contemporary Internet (Hart, 2001; Jandrić, 2010). However, opportunities for deschooling cannot be restricted to mere technical feasibility. On that basis, 'Deschooling virtuality' (Jandrić, 2014) shows that Illich's vision of deschooling society explicitly depends on anarchist views to human nature.

In contemporary network society, Illich's deschooling would imply radical transfer of educational activities online — the road to deschooling society arrives at deschooling virtuality. Institutionalized schools keep the gate to knowledge through various standards interpreted by teachers. In deschooling virtuality, that gate is kept by owners of Internet infrastructures, policies of Internet service providers, and technicians. The gate-keepers have changed, but the gates have remained. Does that not imply a new kind of serfdom (towards those who own Internet infrastructure and write usage policies), a universal virtual schoolhouse (through institutionalized online degrees), or even a universal virtual prison (because being excluded from the Internet more or less implies deprivation from many freedoms)? Consequently, the Internet is not the kind of responsibly limited, convivial tool that Illich imagined. As the Internet mirrors various tensions from the society at large, the 'mechanics' of deschooling directly confronts Illich's basic assumptions.

As a voluntary activity, virtual deschooling is fairly benevolent. However, as we contribute to social networks, listen to online music, and write our blogs, the whole society slowly but surely evolves – traditional occupations such as journalism lose

their importance while others, such as computer programming, are on the rise. As opposed to slow evolution, Illich's vision of deschooling requires profound, revolutionary social changes – basically, society would need to be reinvented from scratch. Therefore, even the highly developed process of deschooling virtuality might never transform itself into a process of deschooling society.

Critical response to 'Deschooling virtuality'

Upon rehabilitating Illich's deschooling in the context of the contemporary Internet, I realised that my research had merely scratched the surface. While it is essential, the question *What can be done?* provides merely the basis for future inquiry. The next important question - much harder to answer - is *What should be done?* In order to answer that question, I asked several prominent thinkers about deschooling today. Here are their answers.

Larry Cuban, professor emeritus at Stanford University, and doyen of classroom technology practice and research :

> Deschooling in 2014 comes wrapped in the mantle of total online or virtual schooling, home schooling, and similar schemes that dispense with brick-and-mortar schools. Sure, access to the Internet and fire hydrant gushers of information does appeal to many champions of more high-tech in schools — some of those champions, however, might wince at what Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, and Everett Reimer wrote in the full flush of school-haters in the 1960s and 1970s. What so many deschooling advocates overlooked then (and now) in their zeal to dismantle public schools, both good and bad ones, are the multiple functions that public schools serve in a democratic society. Most of the deschooling advocates were opposed to U.S. schooling on ideological, not effectiveness, grounds. Schools taught conformity, squelched real learning, overlooked individual differences among children and youth, and were holding tanks for eventual dropouts.

Today, eager promoters of high-tech in schools are less concerned about political and social ideology than that earlier generation was. Much of their eagerness for virtual schools is driven by the failure of public schools to be efficient and effective in producing graduates who can enter the labour market and be productive workers — a different ideology, to be sure. Were producing graduates for the economy the primary goal of tax-supported public schools in the U.S., perhaps deschooling might have some traction. But that is not the case. Schools have custodial and socialization functions (e.g. becoming productive citizens, abiding by community norms, thinking critically, etc.) that are crucial to a democratic society. Deschooling advocates of the 1970s wanted to dispense with those functions completely. High-tech champions of online schooling and blended schools too often ignore these functions in their lust for more, better, and faster information and communication in schools.

PJ: Could we say, then, that the idea of deschooling is just another example of magical thinking?

LC: Yes, it is a prime example of that wishful thinking. (Cuban and Jandrić, 2015: 430-431)

Guy Standing, professor at the University of London, and co-founder of the Basic Income Earth Network:

The role of information and communication technologies is potentially wonderful. But … there are dangers of overload, surveillance, superficiality, lack of reflection, and so on. We need to educate ourselves as a major priority. And we must realise that human physical contact and personalised relationships are vital for real democracy and full freedom.

I recall reading Illich with great pleasure. He was a progressive romantic. I do not think his ideas around class were particularly helpful. But he did see that schooling was part of the process of proletarianisation, part of the disciplinary apparatus, disciplining workers to internalise a life of stable subordinated labour. That is not the precariat. The state is trying to habituate the precariat to a life of unstable labour, and the education system is being commercialised and commodified to suit that purpose. It is terrifying. That is why it is so important that we struggle for the decommodification of all aspects of education and information. (Standing and Jandrić, 2014: 4).

Peter McLaren, Distinguished Professor at Chapman University, and one of the leading architects of critical pedagogy:

While Illich's idea of deschooling is obviously based on a utopian image of human beings (an in-depth critique of Illich's educational ideas in the context of the contemporary Internet can be found in the book called *Wikiworld* (2010), co-authored by Juha Suoranta and Tere Vaden), his lasting legacy lies in his profound analyses of the relationships between the human race and its environment. Barry Sanders, co-author with Illich of *ABC: The alphabetization of the popular mind* (Sanders and Illich, 1989), shared the following story about Illich which has been described as follows by Richard Wall:

At one point during a talk in Maine, in the midst of Ivan describing his mistrust of electronic technology and in particular his terror of e-mail, a young man leapt to his feet and shouted out, 'But, Mr. Illich, don't you want to communicate with us?' Ivan immediately shouted back, 'No. I have absolutely no desire to communicate with you. You may not interact with me, nor do I wish to be downloaded by you. I should like very much to talk to you, to stare at the tip of your nose, to

embrace you. But to communicate – for that I have no desire.'
(Sanders and Illich, 1989)

Illich taught one to be fearless – on stage or in the audience. I would
hate any kind of technophobia or dystopian imagination to destroy the
fearlessness we need to move forward towards the future. (McLaren
and Jandrić, 2014: 815).

Henry Giroux, Global Television Network Chair at McMaster University, and one of
the founding theorists of critical pedagogy :

If Ivan Illich's Deschooling today is read as an attack on public
schools, the argument aids the right wing attack on all things public,
but if it points to other sites of education outside of institionalized
schooling as sites of potential learning and struggle, I think it is
useful. That said, I think public and higher education are under attack
by the neoliberal avengers and the religious fundamentalists, at least
in the United States and United Kingdom. So the real question is: If
schools are under attack, what is it about them that seems so
dangerous? And that question already provides a part of the answer. A
part of the answer is that schools are public – they represent public
spheres. A part of the answer is that schools offer the possibility for
people to engage in dissent – to learn how to be critically engaged
agents. Schools offer the possibility for dialogues, insights and
knowledge that are impossible to get access to elsewhere. And schools
often produce modes of sociality that are dangerous – where people
work together, where people work collectively. I never liked the more
limited notion of deschooling. I did not think that the issue was
whether we should do away with public schools. I thought there were
two issues. First, we should do everything to retain public schools and
make them stronger, because they are absolutely vital to any

democracy. Second, we have to broaden the notion of education, so that it is not restricted strictly to schools. (Giroux and Jandrić, 2015)

Howard Rheingold, professor at Stanford University, original member of the digerati, and inventor of the term 'virtual communities'

I think, to be really specific, that some of the values that were disseminated into the mainstream by the counterculture had to do with taking more personal control and having more personal autonomy over one's fate by using tools that gave people more power. Hence the fact that Stewart Brand, creator of the Whole Earth Catalog, was the person who created the term personal computer. We already discussed the very important role of the United States Department of Defense in the creation of digital media. However, had it been up to the US Defense Department, or the existing computer industry, or the telecommunications industry, we really would not have the personal computers and networks as we know them. It was visionaries such as Douglas Engelbart and others who really wanted to have tools that would enable personal empowerment.

By this point, digital tools for personal empowerment have been used by billions of people to increase their autonomy and freedom. They are also useful to capitalists, they are useful to terrorists, they are useful to authoritarian governments – in the same egalitarian way that printing press enabled the Bible, and Mein Kampf, and the Communist Manifesto, to reach worldwide audiences. I am not saying that technologies are neutral. However, digital technology is a tool that enhances communication. It will enhance communications that many people feel are beneficial, and it will enhance communications that many people feel are destructive. (Rheingold and Jandrić, forthcoming, 2015)

Deschooling virtuality 2.0

Originally, Illich's deschooling is aimed at improving human learning and creating a better world. However, his ideas have already been appropriated into the service of capital. All around the world, schools are under attack. Information technologies play an important role on both sides of this attack, and advocating deschooling at such an historical moment clearly adds fuel to the fire. Schools have an essential function in democratic society, and Illich's deschooling implies transfer of that function from the society to the individual. At present, such transfer works directly in favour of capital as it clearly contributes to (further) commodification of education. While perhaps feasible, deschooling virtuality is not such a great idea – nowadays, Illich's visions are just as utopian as half a century ago.

In order to learn from Illich, however, one does not need to take in the full utopia. The idea of deschooling provides nuanced insights into the nexus of education, technologies, and society. We need not fear technologies, but we also need not fetishize them. We need to reject magical thinking, and recognize that digital technologies are mere communication devices – in spite of their extraneous power, it is the content of communication and human touch that matter. Technologies are neither neutral nor biased; they escape simple binary logic and require constant inquiry and reinvention.

Schools are vital for the democratic society. However, we need to recognise that more and more learning happens outside schools. We need to recognise that more and more communication happens online. We need to recognise that our students develop hybrid online/offline identities. We need to recognize the advent of new digital cultures. We need to recognize their roots in human nature. In that sense, rehabilitation of Illich's ideas is more needed than ever. Instead of utopian replacement of bricks-and-mortar schools by deschooling virtuality, therefore, Illich's work can be put to much better use: to help us develop new critical pedagogies and open new routes for individual and collective emancipation in the context of the network society.

Note

The first part of the article presents the core part of the argument presented in Jandrić, P. (2014). Deschooling Virtuality. *Open Review of Educational Research*, 1(1), 84-98.

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