

Looking again at Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society*

IAN WINCHESTER
University of Calgary

It is nearly fifty years since Ivan Illich's conceived of his 1971 book *Deschooling Society*. Of course over the last fifty years or so society has not been deschooled at all. In fact, it has schooled much more than ever before. Here is his bombshell first paragraph in Chapter 1 entitled "Why We Must Disestablish School".

Many students, especially those who are poor, intuitively know what the schools do for them. They school them to confuse process and substance. Once these become blurred, a new logic is assumed: the more treatment there is the better are the results; or, escalation leads to success. 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. His imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value. Medical treatment is mistaken for health care, social work for the improvement of community life, police protection for safety, military poise for national security, and creative endeavour is defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends, and their improvement is made to depend on allocating more resources to the management of hospitals, schools and other agencies in question.

UNESCO tells us annually that more and more children are getting more and more schooling worldwide. Even in the countries of Africa and South America the percentages of children, both girls and boys, offered a publicly funded education are rising annually. But what is the measure of these advancing school systems worldwide?

Illich suggests that a good school system: (1) should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives, (2) empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them and (3) furnish all

who want to present an issue to the public with an opportunity to make their challenge known. Some might argue that Google handles (1), Twitter handles (2) and any number of universal forums like Facebook and Linked In and their ilk handle number (3) in our own time.

On the other side, he suggests (what is certainly not the case at the moment), that "Leaners should not be forced to submit to an obligatory curriculum, or to discrimination based on whether they possess a certificate or a diploma. Nor should the public be forced to support, through a regressive taxation, a huge professional apparatus of educators and buildings which in fact restricts the public's chances for learnt to the services the profession is willing to put on the market. It should make free speech, free assembly, and a free press truly universal and, therefore, fully educational."

It might be argued that at the present time, though the school systems are intact and require the passing through an obligatory curriculum, the easy availability of laptop computers, iPads and iPhones and given the ready access to wifi that Illich's suggested opportunities are in principle universally available. And this is generally true in spite of the present requirement that one actually attend a physical school and cover a mandatory curriculum whether the country is "fascist, democratic or socialist, big or small, rich or poor"(p.74, DS).

Anybody who wants to can learn a foreign language on line with a little personal effort. There are numerous excellent websites offering instruction, the voices of native speakers, lots of practice and useful things to read and think about in other countries that speak and write in languages different from our own. One can ask practically any question of Google or Wikipedia and receive instantly excellent and accurate answers, often enormous numbers of good answers, that would have taken days or weeks to run down at a good library (had one been available) over the previous history of civilization. One does not have to travel to an educational centre any more to learn about practically any topic and if one wants, receive certification for one's leaning.

It is true that credentialing has not disappeared as Illich's would have wanted. Where there are learned professions one cannot yet become a doctor or a lawyer or an engineer or a pharmacist or an architect on one's own without passing through a prescribed professional course. Even if one has the credential one of the nastier situations a new immigrant to a country like Canada faces is that their credentials are immediately thrown into question. Often they have to retool, work at a menial job or take the same course over again in the new country and new language. Many medically trained physicians and surgeons or dentists arriving in Canada end up driving taxis to earn a living, many teachers of English do not count as they do not have a "Canadian accent", many excellent advocates or solicitors have to study law all over again, many engineers or architects are unemployed or working at the lowest possible level in something analogous to their former professions.

One of the most interesting suggestions in Deschooling Society is that one might take advantage of "things, models, peers and elders" which, if intelligently organized and made available could offer the kind of education that everybody needs. Interestingly this is pretty much the kind of education that we understand that the indigenous peoples of North America, and possibly elsewhere, actually offered to their young for the better part of the last ten thousand years. The Inuit of Labrador, for example, living in the harshest conditions on the planet Earth, characteristically let their children learn by watching and trying out with no planned verbal instruction. The wonders of a kayak or umiak created from bone and skin and how to use them for transport or hunting a seal in the Arctic ice requires enormous creativity, precision and daring. Furthermore, such learning is the kind of thing one can use to learn other things without the necessities of reading instruction manuals. It was an education of "things, models, peers and elders".

During the Second World War my father was an officer in the Royal Canadian Airforce working in air traffic control at Gander airbase in Newfoundland, the largest and busiest Allied airbase. There was always an enormous number of airplanes needing repair used for Atlantic transport and in tracking down and destroying

German uBoats. He claimed that the best mechanics were the Inuit mechanics who could neither read nor write and often could not speak any English. But they could learn how an engine worked and apparently effortlessly learn how to repair it. Their education at the hands of their elders was just the kind of education needed for the task.

Our universities and schools are presently wondering how, as an act of reconciliation and understanding, we might indigenize our schools and universities. Deschooling Society might actually be offering, through Ivan Illich's suggestions, how we might understand such a possibility of indigenization at every level of learning.

Another interesting suggestion made by Ivan Illich is that we should encourage learning webs that involve potentially anybody wanting to teach and anybody wanting to learn. Such webs are in principle available due to the vast coverage of such sites as Facebook and LinkedIn, Twitter and Instagram and a host of others. Many of our present university courses take for granted that one of the best ways for students to prosper and learn is through the involvement with their peers on such webs of connection using the modern media including those directly designed for teaching and learning like Desire to Learn (D2L).

These developments have permitted a return to home schooling that is the fastest growing educational sector in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and British Columbia. The World Wide Web as it is appropriately called has now an astonishing array of opportunities in terms of applications, sites, data bases, search engines like Google and many others that permit practically any kind of learning or seeking almost instantly. The hours of pouring through reference books to find what one is looking for has been transformed often into milliseconds. This permits families to consider educating their own children while doing other things like foreign travelling, skiing, singing in a choir, playing sports, taking apart a car and putting it together again, and other activities that are intrinsically educational but that schools cannot normally engage in with such ease. Interestingly those home schooling are not necessarily a privileged elite as in years past, but

just parents who think their children need an alternative kind of education.

It would be interesting to see what Ivan Illich might have thought about the present educational opportunities in the world, so many of which appear to parallel what he dreamed of in his wonderful book.

Ian Winchester
Editor