

Deschooled learning

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Introduction

Education in the developed world is changing rapidly. The factors driving that change include the Internet-based technologies which make information available, facilitate online dialogue between individuals, allow the formation of virtual communities of interest and make learning resources available online. At the same time, a new consensus on lifelong learning is emerging which warns us all to anticipate several career transitions during our lives and stresses the growing importance of education and training. In the ever-increasing pace of post-industrial society we need to engage in learning continuously.

As learning becomes more important and makes increasing demands on time and money, we need to find ways for as much learning as possible to occur on the job and in all other aspects of a learner's life (Viall 1996 p.76). The differences between 'typical' learning in a traditional educational institution and learning in the workplace are legion but we will focus on physical proximity, relevance, certification and degree of formality. To begin, we need to outline some of the work of Ivan Illich, from whom we have drawn the concept of *deschooling*. Much of our exposition of his ideas, particularly next section of this paper, follows Illich's original text.

Illich's Deschooling Society

The opening of this paper identifies some of the factors driving change in education. These include online information, dialogue, communities and learning resources. As components of a new learning environment, they seem closely related to the resources specified by radical education reformers working and writing in the late 1960s and 1970s. Their opposition to compulsory schooling was based on a cogent critique but their proposals for change were stillborn. The most famous (or infamous) of these prophets of radical change is Ivan Illich and we will be drawing on ideas from his book *Deschooling Society* (1971). In this section, we present an outline of his ideas and in the next, we argue that the Internet can provide all the facilities he thought necessary to supplant institutionalised education. In 1970, Illich thought that the deschooling revolution was inevitable and imminent. We believe that deschooling will take the form of a more pluralistic, more global pattern of educational activity in which the Internet is an important medium. Vocational education and training will be profoundly changed. The deschooling revolution will be slow and partial but we believe that its time has come.

Illich is not against education but portrays formal educational institutions as authoritarian and poorly suited for their educational

mission. In particular, he is critical of the kind of institution which combines compulsion, certification and education. In *Deschooling Society*, he recognised an urgent need for research on the possible use of technology to create new educational institutions which serve personal, creative and autonomous interaction. His argument begins by considering equality in education and he quickly concludes that realistic compensatory education for the children of poor families in the United States would be unrealistically expensive. Equal obligatory schooling must, he argues, be recognised as at least economically unfeasible. He also doubts the educational value of compulsory schooling, arguing that the mere existence of school discourages and disables the poor from taking control of their own learning. Schools are not purely educational institutions and Illich lists their main roles as custodial care, selection, indoctrination, and learning. He suggests an alternative approach to learning: that what is needed are new networks, readily available to the public and designed to spread equal opportunity for learning and teaching. These new networks would be more informal and congenial than the schools, colleges and universities which dominate education, hence the term *deschooling*.

In the remainder of this section, we outline Illich's *learning webs* which, he believed, are a sufficient replacement for formal educational institutions. Illich identifies no more than four distinct "channels" which could contain all the resources needed for real learning. They are:

1. things
2. people - who serve as models for skills and values
3. peers who challenge, argue, compete, cooperate, and understand
4. an experienced 'elder' who really cares and expose the learner to confrontation or criticism

Things like machines, animals or events such as meetings are often vitally important for learning. Someone learning to maintain equipment, for example, or to minute a meeting needs good access to examples. Things and events are often readily available to learners outside formal educational institutions, not least in their place of work. If necessary, some can be reserved for educational purposes, stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories, and places like museums.

Illich proposes a *skill exchange* which permits people who can serve as models for skills and values to list their skills, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills and how they can be reached.

For Illich, peers who challenge, argue, compete, cooperate, and understand can be identified through peer matching, establishing a communications network which permits persons to describe the learning activity in which they wish to engage, in the hope of finding a partner for the inquiry. He suggests that in a large city someone could identify themselves to a computer listing an address and telephone number, indicating a book, article, film, or recording on which that person seeks a partner for discussion. Within days, a list of others who recently had taken the same initiative could be mailed. This list would be used to arrange a meeting with persons who initially would be known exclusively by the fact that they requested a dialogue about the same subject.

At times, Illich doubts whether what he calls an experienced 'elder' is really needed. What he proposes, though, is a *reference service* to educators-at-large, who can be listed in a directory giving the addresses and self-descriptions of professionals, paraprofessionals, and free-lancers - along with conditions of access to their services. They could be selected by individual learners by polling or consulting their former clients.

An aspect of vocational learning which Illich stresses is the importance of drill and practice, arguing that the student who is faced with the task of acquiring a new skill may benefit greatly from the discipline associated with the old-fashioned schoolmaster who taught reading, Hebrew, catechism, or multiplication by rote.

Illich envisages that matching services, storehouses for learning objects and the fees of educators-at-large will be funded by the State through an educational passport or an 'edu-credit card' provided to each citizen at birth. Savings to the State would come from reduced funding of formal institutions.

For many professional educators, particularly those in traditional institutions, these proposals raise immediate concerns about assessment and certification. How will employers, say, know enough about performance at school, college or university to make reasonable recruitment decisions? Illich's answer is that the coupling of learning and certification is inherently problematic, a kind of contamination of the process of education. In any case, what an individual knows, understands and can do is important for employment or further study but how they developed these abilities is irrelevant. He argues that we need a law forbidding discrimination in hiring, voting, or admission to centres of learning based on previous attendance on some specific course or courses. A law of this sort might not stop the award of formal certificates but some of the uses to which certification is now put would become illegal.

Finding the resources needed for real learning

Illich's assumption is that *skill exchanges* which identify people willing to serve as models for skills will lead to face to face meetings. The same can be said of *peer matching* to identify fellow learners and *reference services* to 'elders'. Even *things*, if they are specially housed for educational purposes, could be accessed by anyone with knowledge of availability. Writing in the 1960s, he makes specific reference to computer technology and it is probably unnecessary for the authors of this paper to point out the suitability of computer databases for the kind of matching that he proposes. The fact that he calls one of the chapters of his book 'Learning Webs' seems prophetic and, when read by post-Internet readers, highlights the suitability of the Internet for providing free public access to information of this kind. One site of this sort is The Education Exchange (<http://brainpower.iscool.net/>) offering 'a gateway' to free educational information and instruction. The site includes a [searchable course database](#) that puts students in touch with available resources. It is funded through its association with the online retailer Amazon (<http://www.amazon.com/>). Internet services can perform the matching functions which, according to Illich, are all that is needed for real learning. But the use of freely accessible databases represents only part of the potential of the Internet to support learning. It can also support high quality distance education, which maintains proximity between the learner and their workplace, home, and human support.

Proximity

Perhaps it is because of Illich's emphasis on lifelong learning outside formal institutions - and vocational learning in particular - that he does not write much about the need for learning resources like books, handouts and worksheets that are vitally important for some courses in traditional institutions. Some learners, of course, dislike the structures and limitations of schooling but some seem most comfortable in a highly structured learning environment. For those seeking a structured experience or seeking certification, online learning offers the potential to bring a course into the workplace itself. Work-based learning usually means greater physical distance between the learner and learning resources, peers and lecturers/teachers. Before the advent of online technologies, this gap was bridged mainly by mail and telephone but online technologies are faster, cheaper, flexible and more responsive.

Online technologies will also support informal learning by people who want to enrich their lives or advance their capabilities without attaching themselves to any formal programme of learning or institution and without regard to certification. The growth of informal learning in the workplace will be relatively difficult to measure but we

believe that it has a central part to play. In this mode the time, location and content of vocational education is chosen by the learner, often in response to a specific problem. Learning is prompted by challenges at work rather than taken up for its own sake. Faced with immediate challenges or problems, people are motivated to find time to acquire the new knowledge, skills, or attitudes they need. In this context, the cost of internet access and course fees are important factors.

Informal learners will have restricted access to educational resources. Some resources are products available at a price; others are available only to those registered on a formal programme of study. Informal learning benefits from the availability of learning materials which are easy to find and free to users. Just as public libraries in the 19th and 20th Centuries did a great deal to bring literature, information and learning resources into the lives of the poor of the developed countries online resources which are freely available need to become better and more diverse. Globewide Network Academy (<http://www.gnacademy.org/>), for example, sets out to promote access to educational opportunities for anybody, anywhere. Their tools are open-source, and can be used and copied without charge.

The importance of proximity can be highlighted by the difficulty and expense of running certain kinds of technical courses in the TAFE sector. In disciplines like Engineering, Computing or Design, TAFE institutions duplicate equipment commonly found in the workplace in their own buildings. In some other courses, learners make do with theoretical input illustrated by photographs or diagrams of the real thing. Online resources can improve on this unsatisfactory approach with animation and simulation but supporting learning outside the confines of a formal institution is a much more important function.

Few educators would dismiss the importance of the workplace as a learning resource, perhaps citing additional advantages such as an increased chance of skill transfer into the working environment and improved retention when new knowledge and skill is put to immediate use. Examples of workplace learning supported online are not easily found and it is consequently very difficult to form an overview of their effectiveness but the importance to trainees and employers of vocational learning in the workplace is relatively well documented. As an example, a study of open learning in small firms in the UK by Hilary Temple (1995) found that open learning was seen by some employers as the only viable option for staff training because they did not feel they could release staff for courses. In many workplaces, employers are willing to release an employee for training while they are unoccupied but often there seems to be no pattern to downtime - which makes it difficult for employers to commit to education and training. In some workplaces, employees could use downtime for education and training if they could also be available to begin work

immediately, for example when a customer comes into a shop or a big delivery arrives. A survey by the American Society for Training and Development (<http://www.astd.org/>) in 1998 illustrates the trend towards using electronic media. Computer based training was used by 66% of 'leading edge' companies, with 44% using CD-ROM, 53% using videoconferencing and 31% other multimedia.

Dialogue

Online learning is different enough from, say, a mid-20th Century correspondence course to constitute a qualitative change. At the core of this, we believe, is its capacity for *dialogue*. Some media are essentially broadcast media, allowing one way communication only. TV and radio, a printed book, a lecture, or a speech are all broadcast media. The telephone and the seminar are examples of media that support dialogue. In education, the lecture is a broadcast, the seminar a dialogue. The lecture is *delivered*, the seminar is *facilitated*. For educational purposes, the most important feature of the Internet, particularly the World Wide Web, is that it is dialogical. (It can, of course, also be used to broadcast.)

Dialogue is a horizontal relationship in which one individual is *with* the other. In Freire's words (1974), it is positive, hopeful, trusting and critical. It involves two-way communication. Broadcast is a vertical relationship in which one person is higher than the other. To borrow Friere's words again, it is loveless, arrogant, hopeless, mistrustful, acritical. Broadcast does not communicate but issues communiques; information passes in one direction.

The Internet has the potential to support a variety of different kinds of dialogue. At its most basic level, a form of automated dialogue takes place when someone browses the World Wide Web. A two-way signal allows the user to transform their virtual environment as they follow links. In this mode, the Web can be used as a source of information. The Internet also allows dialogue between people through email, chat rooms, online notice boards, mail bases and so on. This dialogue can be synchronous or there can be a delay between responses - but comments and responses can be viewed online as a coherent and informed conversation between real people who can also be contacted by email.

Like courses in a conventional school or university, a lot of this dialogue will be between learners (see, for example, Gibson & Rutherford (1998)) but there is a place for teaching too. Online tutors provide importance guidance for the learners. They give feedback on the ongoing discussion and steer the thread of conversation ensuring that key points can be explored. A particularly important feature of many courses is the development of trust between the learners and the

formation of an online learning community (Palloff & Pratt 1999). Tutors play a key role in this process and are often pivotal to the success of the course. Developments in online assessment will lead to assessment tools which learners can use formatively to provide them with information about their own learning.

Assessment and certification

Illich argues that we need new laws forbidding discrimination in hiring, voting, or academic admissions based on attendance on some specific course or courses. If this suggestion seems too radical, we should remember that many employers already use a selection process of their own design and pay scant attention to formal qualifications. Where employers do require formal qualifications, the link between qualification and job content is sometimes questionable. Some higher education institutions like the UK's Open University accept students without the usual academic prerequisites. There are some areas of professional employment, medical surgery for example, where the developed countries would find it difficult to do without certification altogether, but the potential for an overall shift away from selection based on formal certificates seems possible, even desirable. One option worth exploring is selection based on a portfolio of work built up by learners over a period of years. This practice allows employers to make a reasonably close match between job specification and employee capability and can also form a basis for entry to further study. In some institutions, e.g. Art schools, this practice is well established. Another option for informal learners is to study for a General Equivalency Diploma or its equivalent outside the US. Authors like Bennett (1998) and Owston (1997) predict that electronic distance examinations will play a key role in this development.

New educational structures

A wide variety of new educational projects and enterprises are developing in response to the factors driving educational change (Whittington and Sclater, 1998). These new structures range from clearing houses listing distance learning courses and resources offered by more than one institution to full scale new institutions delivering their own fully accredited degree courses. Many of these new institutions are developing new models for delivering courses that better suit lifelong learners and a curriculum that specifically targets early or mid career professionals.

Vocational education and training is a vast enterprise involving huge amounts of time and money. In the main, training is currently supported by a patchwork of small providers. In the UK, the market for non-government training providers was worth an estimated £16bn in 1998 (Baxter 1998). A local study in Manchester, England (Jarvis 1998) found that training was not confined to a few companies.

Almost all the firms surveyed had provided some form of training during the preceding two years and most had a definite training plan.

Acceptance of electronic media opens the way for penetration of the global training market by multinational companies. In some cases, courses will be generated in-house. In 1995, the *Multimedia Training Newsletter* reported that Price Waterhouse's multimedia training programme had been used by 7,000 learners in 50 countries, reducing the time needed for learners to attain the same standard of knowledge by 50% at the same time as reducing training costs from US\$760 per learner to only \$106 for the multimedia training. There are a relatively small number of international players in online education such as Regents College in New York (<http://www.regents.edu/>) and UNITAR in South East Asia (<http://www.unitar.edu.my/>). But many traditional universities and colleges are offering or developing online courses, often on a for-profit basis in partnership with commercial providers. Courses in vocational education and training are available from a rapidly growing range of commercial organisations, some of whom already have a substantial share of the global electronic communication market.

Some State-sponsored provision seems to be embracing change, for example the Pennsylvania Department of Education (USA) which is investing approximately US\$10 million, over two years, to create Digital School Districts and states that "the ultimate goal of education needs to shift from receiving a diploma to life-long learning" (<http://121.org/digitalsd/>). The same department sponsors Pennsylvania's Distance Learning Exchange (<http://dle.state.pa.us/>), a web-based clearing house of distance learning and Internet opportunities.

One of the changes which seems sure to proceed is a weakening in the importance of local providers - often TAFE institutions, community colleges or universities who offer educational services to a well defined and reasonably secure local 'patch'. Instead, the emergence of in-house training, national and international providers will weaken this pattern of provision. Online technologies will become an increasingly important source of support for learning in the workplace. Some of this learning will be certified, some will not. Some courses will be provided by the employer, some by existing providers, some by new online providers. Some providers will offer high quality training materials in a bid for profit, some will support relatively short and highly focused episodes of informal learning. An example of an online resource which seeks to support a community of learners is LUVIT (www.luvit.com) which advertises itself as a global community for educators, learners and other users interested in e-learning and a global marketplace for the trade of knowledge and education material online. An extraordinary diversity of new

educational structures is emerging and one way to understand their impact is to return Illich's ideas on deschooling.

Deschooling

Illich believed that the system of compulsory schooling was unsustainable and he turned out to be mistaken, at least in the medium term. A much less radical vision of the future seems to be emerging, in which alternatives to learning in formal institutions are increasingly attractive and varied - and the formal institutions themselves are weakened as a result. Schools, colleges and universities are not uniformly popular places in which the learning experience is a comfortable one for everyone. Illich nicely identifies the flaw in most formal institutions; that a mix of compulsion, indoctrination, certification and education is responsible for an atmosphere which is, at least for some, uncomfortably authoritarian. As for adult learners, many simply do not want to go 'back to school' and a lot of vocational education and training is deliberately designed to avoid reminders of the adult learners' school days.

New opportunities for lifelong learning, particularly vocational learning, will weaken the motivation to provide universal and compulsory basic education throughout childhood and into adolescence. Some professional educators, particularly in schools, will resist change. Others, probably including those who have tired of force feeding 'education' to reluctant teenagers, will welcome it. There is room for scepticism about how important pedagogical debates about the merits of online learning will turn out to be. In academic circles, the efficacy of online learning or even pre-Internet computer assisted learning is disputed. This is nicely illustrated by Russel's (1999) research bibliography on technology for distance education which documents the "No Significant Difference Phenomenon". But online learning is being driven forward by motives like ambition and faith in the future. If sound pedagogic reasons for adopting it are absent, this could turn out to be an ironic but minor detail in the history of education. Powerful self-interest groups are already involved in these changes. Political and financial considerations may prove to be more influential in the development of online learning and deschooling than well considered social policy. Important changes have begun.

Online learning is already an important feature of higher education and the TAFE sector is introducing online courses in many countries. These developments tend to take students away from existing courses and formal institutions. In itself, this may not lead to attrition in those institutions. If predictions about lifelong learning are correct, online learning will grow in an expanding education sector and many traditional institutions could be unscathed. Online learning itself will

contribute to growth in educational activity, playing the dual role of stimulating and satisfying demand. The overall picture, however, will include a greater variety of learning opportunities with some casualties among the existing institutions.

Changes in the higher education and TAFE sectors are unlikely to extend to primary/elementary schools and may have a limited impact on High Schools. It is too early to anticipate the lowering of the school leaving age in the developed world and there is little evidence of real political will to replace primary/elementary schools with new online options. What seems clear, however, is that the cosy international consensus that there should be compulsory institutionalised education for children and teenagers will be challenged. This challenge will not come solely as a consequence of the increased vigour of vocational education and training. In many countries (Scotland is an example) Further Education (TAFE) institutions are already offering a more informal and congenial environment to young people in compulsory schooling. The burgeoning home schooling movement in North America (<http://www.home-school.com/>) challenges the prerogative of the State to be sole providers of education for children and young people and is already making extensive use of the Internet as a source of contacts and resources. The availability of testing for a General Equivalency Diploma or its counterpart outside the US will be a comfort to learners who prefer to learn in an informal setting.

Conclusion

Online learning technology is developing rapidly in response to the technological opportunity offered by the Internet, a drive towards better quality and cost effectiveness in education and the intervention of commercial interests. The relationship between the increased popularity of online learning as an activity and the technical development of the technologies which support it seems symbiotic and it is reasonable to anticipate accelerating growth. These changes will not happen in isolation; we anticipate a substantial challenge to formal educational institutions and the emergence of more global and pluralistic educational opportunities.

The emergence of new educational technologies offer an opportunity for us to rethink the shape and purpose of educational provision. In this context, Illich's writing on deschooling is a helpful tool for identifying the essential elements of learning experiences and the probable consequences of a move towards online learning. Vocational education and training will benefit from technologies which support learning at any time in any place and will be enriched by the technical capacity of the new medium to support dialogue. The capacity to support learning in the workplace is likely to shift the balance in

learning activity away from traditional institutions and towards new modes of vocational education and training.

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