



## The Idea of Deschooling Society in the Educational Philosophy of Ivan Illich

### KEYWORDS

Deschooling, self education, free inquiry, learning web

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**ABSTRACT** Modern age is the age of competition & struggle in which the material success is fast becoming the only criteria of one's ability and potential. It is so astonishing that as the number of schools and colleges are increasing, the instances of pupils falling short in adjustability and motivation are becoming more evident. The overemphasis on examination and conformity is turning these educational institutions as place of burden for helpless students. In this context, the ideas and philosophy propagated by renowned thinker Ivan Illich is inarguably getting the attention of intelligentsia all over the world. In his Deschooling concept, Ivan Illich upended the conversation around education reform by arguing that instead of trying to optimize the lamentable systems of compulsory schooling with new technology or innovative teaching strategies, we ought to dismantle the system altogether and build learning webs, peer-matching systems, skill exchanges, and other resources for liberated learning and free inquiry. The idea of Deschooling Society continues to be popular with self-educators and unschooling families. In this paper, a humble attempt has made to analyze the philosophical ideas of Deschooling in Ivan Illich's work and its educational implications in our present time.

### INTRODUCTION

The system of education is supposed to be a gateway of liberation and broadmindedness. Education is supposed to guide the disciple towards enlightenment and eternal joy. But sadly, modern education has significantly failed in the achievement of these splendid objectives. Overemphasis on formalities and neglect of pupil centeredness has resulted in modern classrooms becoming monotonous and uninspiring. Austrian philosopher & rebel social critic, Ivan Illich (4<sup>th</sup> September 1926–2<sup>nd</sup> December 2002) revolted against the monopolistic and oppressive type of education which is converting its students into mere conformists. Born in Vienna, Ivan Illich was a student at the Piaristen gymnasium in Vienna from 1936 to 1941, but was expelled by the occupying Nazis in 1941 because his mother had Jewish ancestry. From this point on, Ivan Illich became something of a wanderer – travelling the world and having the minimum of material possessions. After completing his formal study, Illich wrote extensively about the problems of institutionalizing education. He explored the functioning and impact of education systems (Deschooling Society), technological development (Tools for Conviviality), energy, transport and economic development (Energy and Equity) and medicine (Medical Nemesis).

In 1971, Illich published his book 'Deschooling Society', a critical look at the troubles of modern schooling. His contentious and thought provoking book advocated for bringing radical changes in the education system, including the disestablishment of traditional schools and the development of more informal 'learning webs'. In his famous words, "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. Pupil's 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 dignity for national security and the rat race is mistaken for productive work". Ivan Illich upended the conversation around education reform by arguing that instead of trying to optimize the lamentable systems of compulsory schooling with new

technology or innovative teaching strategies, we ought to dismantle the system altogether and build learning webs, peer-matching systems, skill exchanges, and other resources for liberated learning and free inquiry.

Due to the uniqueness of this Deschooling idea, it is therefore not strange that this idea continues to be popular with self-educators and unschooling families. It is obviously less popular with those teachers and credentialing boards who wish to remain traditional and conservative in their approach towards education.

Ivan Illich didn't believe that school problems could be solved by increasing funding or setting higher standards. He believed that educational problems originated with government-run schools themselves and were worsened by the way schools made people think about learning. Institutions create the needs and control their satisfaction, and, by so doing, turn the human being and her or his originality into mere objects. Modern societies tend to establish more and more institutions – "This process undermines people – it lessens their self-belief and capacity to solve problems... It kills genial relationships. Finally it kills creativity", exclaimed Illich in the support of his argument. Illich claimed in his work that most learning happens informally, whereby the Institutionalized schooling hampers true learning. He said, "A...major illusion on which the school system rests is that most learning is the result of teaching. Teaching, it is true, may contribute to certain kinds of learning under certain circumstances. But most people acquire most of their knowledge outside school, and schools have become their place of confinement during an increasing part of their lives". Going further, Illich exclaimed that learning happens casually, and even most deliberate learning is not the result of programmed instruction. Normal children learn their first language casually, although faster if their parents pay attention to them. Most people who learn a second language well do so as a result of peculiar circumstances and not of sequential teaching. Most people who read widely, and with pleasure, merely believe that they learned to do so in school; when challenged, they easily cast off this misapprehension. He further put a ques-

tion before academicians, "Students may learn something from spending eight hours a day inside a classroom. But, how much more could they learn by spending their time reading, having natural discussions, or working towards actual accomplishments?"

The problem with educational institutions, according to Illich, is that they force ownership over the very idea of learning. They make people believe that learning is the sphere of schools alone. 'Don't attempt this at home,' they seem to say. "Your learning must be supervised by a credentialed professional." When schools fail, people see it as a further indication that learning itself is an unattainable challenge. He further explained, "All over the world the school has an anti-educational effect on society. School is recognized as the institution which specializes in education. The failures of school are taken by most people as a proof that education is a very costly, very complex and almost impossible task." Not only do traditional schools diminish students' ability to learn on their own, they take students away from the situations where learning readily occurs.

Now the question arises- what is the better system for education? Ivan Illich envisions a better way to encourage learning. Instead of conventional schooling, he believes that people of all ages should be able to decide what they learn and when they learn it. Illich proposed that informal education can be supported through four services:- libraries that store the materials needed for learning, skills-based exchanges where people can develop specific abilities, peer-matching that allows learners to meet up others interested in studying the same subject, and a database of educators available for support. He opined that the government could support informal learning by replacing compulsory schooling with options. Illich explained his theoretical perspective in these words, "Right now educational credit good at any skill center could be provided in limited amounts for people of all ages, and not just to the poor. Such credits would permit most people to acquire the skills most in demand, at their convenience, better, and with fewer undesirable side effects than in school." Ivan Illich expected a "learning web" that connected people with the resources they need. The ideas presented by Ivan Illich continue to be debated, decades after *Deschooling Society* was published. His ideas created the foundation for the unschooling movement that thrives today. Advocates for school choice often rely on Illich's words when advocating for charter schools and alternative programs.

In his pioneer work *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) which was published only two years after *Deschooling Society*, Illich wrote "privileged professional groups . . . have come to apply a 'radical monopoly' on such basic human activities as health, agriculture, home-building, and learning, leading to a war on survival that robs peasant societies of their vital skills and know-how. The result of much

economic development is very often not human flourishing but 'modernized poverty,' dependency, and an out-of-control system in which the humans become just some sort of mechanical parts." Illich proposed that we should overturn the present system in order to give people tools that guarantee their right to work with independent efficiency. Illich also gave his views about 'Medical Nemesis' in which Illich attacked existing Western medicine system. He argued that the **medicalization** in recent decades has commonly caused more harm than good and rendered many people in effect lifelong patients. He wondered that the medical industry induces illness, educational institutions induce ignorance, the judicial system perpetuates injustice, or national defense may make a nation less secure. When specific diseconomy is on the increase, this means an institution or industry is increasingly counterproductive to its original intentions.

Now if we observe and scrutinize our modern educational system, we may find that a lot of disorder can be seen in the overall educational ambience of our country. Instead of touching the minds and hearts of students, our educational institutions are fast turning into purely commercial entities which seem to be only concerned about minting money from field of education. If our educational system has not been able to make an emotional and healthy bond with most of its students, the fault lies within our system. It is therefore no wonder that a section is fast emerging in our metropolitan cities which is vying for the idea of *Deschooling society*. For most of the peoples, the ideas and philosophy of this great philosopher and thinker may seem to be too radical to apply, but we should not forget that such radical ideas emerge from the continuous failure of our modern educational system. We need to give our students a chance to open their mind and becoming an partner in whole educational process, instead of mere spectators or conformists. Every institution of our society ought to acquire the trust of its stakeholders by the application of vision and compassion in their functioning.

## CONCLUSION

Ivan Illich's critique remains deeply suggestive. Ivan Illich's concern for conviviality – on the ordering of education, work, and society as a whole in line with human needs, and his call for the 'deprofessionalization' of social relations has provided an important set of ideas upon which educators concerned with mutuality and sociality can draw. Sadly, the same old education system still persists which is largely monopolistic and careless for the stakeholders. But Illich's vision is on its way to being realized in the 21st century, not by education professionals within the education reform movement, but by inventive startups seeking to disrupt the traditional models entirely. His critique of the school and call for the *Deschooling of society* hit a chord with many workers and alternative educators. The time is not far when the schools and colleges will have to address the issue of making schools as centre of joyful and life related learning.

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