

Three Invitations

Dana Stuchul

Ranciere's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, reminds us of the power of story to nullify the assumed divide separating teacher and taught, one who knows from one who doesn't.¹ In storytelling, one posits equality of intelligence. In contrast, in the relationship between teacher and student the inequality of knowledge is presumed. It's the premise of equality that distinguishes teaching/instruction/pedagogy from storytelling. Sharing stories opens a democratic space.

I enjoy sharing the story of my first ever encounter with Ivan Illich while a student at Penn State where Illich held a visiting professor appointment for 12 years. Years earlier while a student at Miami of Ohio, I had purchased his book *Celebration of Awareness* which one of the radical educationalists (either McLaren or Giroux who were then colleagues at Miami) had ordered for a class. I opened the book, quickly recognized that I didn't understand anything in it, and soon forgot about Illich. Years later, in 1996, I was in my second week of graduate studies at Penn State, when a new graduate student friend said in a laundromat, "you've gotta go hear this guy Illich. He gives free public lectures each Tuesday. And, you better go soon, he looks like he's gonna die."

The next Tuesday arrived and I found myself in the packed hall where Illich lectured. I located a seat in the crowd. I watched and listened. What I saw was a man who indeed appeared to be dying, with a large softball-sized growth protruding from the side of his head. His wispy grey hair, blowing about as if choreographed to his sprite-like movements, Illich sitting on his knees on the table one moment, prancing up aisles the next—his energy, however, defied his supposedly imminent death (a death that would not come for 6 years). What I heard throughout the evening was a man referencing "the arts of living, suffering, and dying" coinciding with what was apparently his own approach to the threshold separating this world from the next. I was transfixed.

Attending an Illich lecture was for me reminiscent of my experience of a Catholic Mass. You might stand or kneel. There would be moments of quiet, others of high and exultant energy. From one instant to the next, you might experience awakesness of a hue similar to a lightening strike, or utter bewilderment ... at once wondering how you could know so little and how much there was to know. Illich, the former priest, the great gondolier guided his listeners along a river of history.

To attend an Illich lecture during those years was akin to sanctioned eaves-dropping. Nearly every lecture was attended by a group of Illich "friends"—a rag-tag collection of mostly dissident, junior and de-professionalized intellectuals. Whenever Illich raised his tent, folks from several continents would descend to the place in order to pick up the conversation, to report on new experiences, discoveries, revelations. Illich largely spoke to this circle of "co-conspirators"—people for whom questions were far from academic, scholarship anything but a matter of career enhancement, and deep understanding—or "standing under" was as much a moral as a political activity.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* trans. Kristen Ross (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991).

The theme of discussion where I entered Illich's story-telling was the contemporary loss of common sense...of proportionality...of the capacity to sense in our body "the good"...that sense which unifies all other senses, which is neither located within the intellect, nor is it intuition alone, which is neither universal nor universalizable, but instead is specific to a place and time, to a cultural context, and which is woven into culture itself (which, defined by Illich is the "unique arrangements by which a given group limits exchange relationships to specific times and places"²...a group resistant to the impositions, even seductions of market expansion, if you will).

In the few weeks of Illich's visit to Penn State, his "lectures" (again, not lectures, but conversation among friends where reporting and synthesizing—story-telling—were the *modus operandi*) addressed such diverse topics as the historical body; the architectural column; the mono-chord; the cosmos. From these topics, Illich and friends—compelled by mutual commitment and desire—sought to understand the evolution of contemporary certainties, of concepts born of modernity which collectively risked not political impotence but each one's very ability to be fully human, and then fully humane (to extend the act of the Good Samaritan). To be fully alive in the only moment available was the intention of Illich and friends study.

I can say that I loved those 6 Tuesday Fall lectures, and I loved the lectures about the Illich lectures offered by his devoted friend of 4+ decades, Lee Hoinacki. In the wake of those three autumns, I felt aliveness unlike any other moments of my life. And, I have longed for times similar to those to dawn anew.

I have doubted the current institutionalization of Illich's thought as a Special Interest Group in the American Research Association (AERA).³ I have at times thought it repugnant to place Illich's notion of a circle of friends bonded by shared suffering and common conviction to understand deeply within the frame of an organization dominated by specialized interests and careerists and whose principal contribution to schooling and education has been its own growth. To make it worse, I know what Illich thought of schools, education, and educationalists. And, I have had to check my propensity to safeguard the Illich "orthodoxy" at the door.

What I'm finding is that Illich in AERA may, afterall, allow for surprise...that very Illichian idea that stands opposed to plans, designs, curricula, mandates, rules, and the like.

As an installment within the category "hope for surprise," I'd like to re-issue a few of the invitations for research (research of an Illichian order) that I read in Illich (and which I believe few if any have accepted). I'll further suggest that "study" and "research" inspired by Illich in the form of story-telling, reporting, shared readings *may* further humanize the unreality of this context, and may lead to the kind of sustained reflection that enabled Illich and friends to arrive at important insight into our current predicaments ... what Illich has named "Absurdistan."

Invitation One

In Illich's address in 1986 to the AERA General Assembly (San Francisco, CA), Illich extended his "Plea for Research on Lay Literacy," while posing a question pertinent to this moment. Illich writes, "has schooling now become an initiation ritual introducing students to the cybernetic mind by hiding from all its participants the contradiction between the literate ideas education

² David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Concord, Ontario: Anansi Press, 1992), 193.

³ See <http://ivan-illich.org>.

pretends to serve and the computer image it sells?” Illich’s interest is in the transformation of the literate mind to the cybernetic mind—a mind in which the computer is the key metaphor for human persons and for their place in the world. Illich underscores the urgency of such research into this transformation by recounting Orwell’s fable, *1984*:

It is a story of the State that has turned into a computer, and that of educators who program people so that they come to lose that ‘distality’ between self and I which had come to flower within literate space. They learn to refer to themselves as ‘my system,’ and ‘to input’ themselves as appropriate lines into a mega-text.⁴

In speaking to education researchers, Illich understands that his audience’s interest rests with research IN education. Still, his plea is for research ON education ... for research into “a distinct mode of perception in which the book becomes the decisive metaphor through which we conceive of the Self and its place.”⁵ Illich is clear that lay literacy has no correspondence to whether one is literate or not. Rather, his concern is how all of the innovations, the technological advancements that preceded and enabled the transformation from orality to literacy have paralleled a similar transformation in our cultural and mental topography after Microsoft. Illich holds, I suspect, that as researchers learn about the transformation that has long past, they will be better positioned to comprehend the transformation currently underway ... from a mode of perception in which “the text” was the key metaphor to one overtaken by communication code via the computer.

Invitation Two

A second invitation is found in Illich’s “A Constitution for Cultural Revolution,” written “to initiate discussion about the need for constitutional principles that would guarantee an ongoing cultural revolution in a technological society.” (p. 179) In this short chapter, Illich lays out “an alternative program both to development and to merely political revolution” whose aim is the “transformation of both public and personal reality.” Illich writes,

The political revolutionary wants to improve existing institutions—their productivity and the quality and distribution of their products. His vision of what is desirable and possible is based on consumption habits developed during the last hundred years.⁶

Illich takes the example of “the institution which currently produces education” to illustrate the cultural revolution he calls for. [It is significant to note that this essay (the final one in Illich’s *Celebration of Awareness* was published in 1969, two years prior to *Deschooling Society*.] Illich continues by distinguishing the cultural revolutionary from the political revolutionary:

The political revolutionary strengthens the demand for schooling by futilely promising that under his administration more learning and increased earning will

⁴ Ivan Illich, *In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978-1990* (London: Marion Boyars), 180.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁶ Ivan Illich, *Celebration of Awareness: A Call for Institutional Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 180.

become available to all through more schooling. He contributes to the modernization of a world class structure and a modernization of poverty.⁷

Illich then lays out his radical proposal—the same call made in *Deschooling Society*, which was erroneously misinterpreted as a diatribe against schooling as opposed to a proposal against state-enforced compulsory schooling. Illich writes,

A cultural revolutionary must fight for legal protection from the imposition of any obligatory graded curriculum. The first article of a bill of rights for a modern and humanist society corresponds to the first amendment of the United States Constitution. The state shall make no law with respect to an establishment of education. There shall be no graded curriculum, obligatory for all. To make this disestablishment effective, we need a law forbidding discrimination in hiring, voting, or admission to centers of learning based on previous attendance at some curriculum. This guarantee would not exclude specific tests of competence, but would remove the present absurd discrimination in favor of the person who learns a given skill with the largest expenditure of public funds. A third legal reform would guarantee the right of each citizen to an equal share of public educational resources, the right to verify his share of these resources, and the right to sue for them if they are denied. A generalized GI bill, or an edu-credit card in the hand of every citizen, would effectively implement this third guarantee.... A fourth guarantee to protect the consumer against the monopoly of the educational market would be analogous to anti-trust laws....⁸

Illich goes on to point out that,

A bill of rights for modern man cannot produce cultural revolution. It is merely a manifesto. I have outlined the principles of an educational bill of rights. These principles can be generalized.

The disestablishment of schooling can be generalized to freedom from monopoly in the satisfaction of any basic need. Discrimination on the basis of prior schooling can be generalized to discrimination in any institution because of underconsumption or underprivilege in another. A guarantee of equal education resources is a guarantee against regressive taxation. An educational antitrust law is obviously merely a special case of antitrust laws in general, which in turn are statutory implementations of constitutional guarantees against monopoly.⁹

Illich concludes his call for cultural revolution with a warning; “Only a cultural and institutional revolution which reestablishes man’s control over his environment can arrest the violence by which development of institutions is now imposed by a few for their own interest. Maybe Marx has said it better, criticizing Ricardo and his school: ‘They want production to be

⁷ Ibid, 186.

⁸ Ibid, 188.

⁹ Ibid, 188-89.

limited to ‘useful things,’ but they forget that the production of too many *useful* things results in too many *useless* people”¹⁰

One potential research effort would look at what effects the disestablishment clause had on the flowering of diverse forms of religious practices and communities. Other lines of inquiry might trace a host of sociological questions such as: How has the role of religion and religious expression evolved since disestablishment? How have tensions among religious groups changed? How have attitudes toward religion and religious participation changed? Et al. Parallels between church/religion and school/learning could then be drawn.

Invitation Three

In the forward to Matt Hern’s book *Deschooling Our Lives*, Illich tells the story of how *Deschooling Society* came to be.¹¹ In the telling we get a tiny glimpse of what those seminars in Illich’s Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) must have been like – with Paulo Freire, John Holt, Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, Joel Spring, Everett Reimer, George Dennison and others in attendance—reading drafts of essays distributed by Illich (that would later become *Deschooling*), the sizzling debates, the discussion of alternatives.

Yet, 25 years after the fact, Illich admits his naivete, that he was “barking up the wrong tree.” Illich writes,

I called for the disestablishment of schools for the sake of improving education and here, I noticed, lay my mistake. Much more important than the disestablishment of schools, I began to see, was the reversal of those trends that make of education a pressing need rather than a gift of gratuitous leisure. I began to fear that the disestablishment of the educational church would lead to a fanatical revival of many forms of degraded, all-encompassing education, making the world into a universal classroom, a global schoolhouse. The more important question became, "Why do so many people - even ardent critics of schooling - become addicted to education, as to a drug?"

Illich continues (in the following lengthy excerpt):

Norman Cousins published my own recantation in the Saturday Review during the very week *Deschooling Society* came out. In it I argued that the alternative to schooling was not some other type of educational agency, or the design of educational opportunities in every aspect of life, but a society which fosters a different attitude of people toward tools. I expanded and generalized this argument in my next book, *Tools for Conviviality*.

Largely through the help of my friend and colleague Wolfgang Sachs, I came to see that the educational function was already emigrating from the schools and that, increasingly, other forms of compulsory learning would be instituted in modern society. It would become compulsory not by law, but by other tricks such

¹⁰ Ibid, 189.

¹¹ Matt Hern, *Deschooling Our Lives* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1996).

as making people believe that they are learning something from TV, or compelling people to attend in-service training, or getting people to pay huge amounts of money in order to be taught how to have better sex, how to be more sensitive, how to know more about the vitamins they need, how to play games, and so on. This talk of "lifelong learning" and "learning needs" has thoroughly polluted society, and not just schools, with the stench of education.

Then came the third stage, in the late seventies and early eighties, when my curiosity and reflections focused on the historical circumstances under which the very idea of educational needs can arise. When I wrote *Deschooling Society*, the social effects, and not the historical substance of education, were still at the core of my interest. I had questioned schooling as a desirable means, but I had not questioned education as a desirable end. I still accepted that, fundamentally, educational needs of some kind were an historical given of human nature. I no longer accept this today.

As I refocused my attention from schooling to education, from the process toward its orientation, I came to understand education as learning when it takes place under the assumption of scarcity in the means which produce it. The "need" for education from this perspective appears as a result of societal beliefs and arrangements which make the means for so-called socialization scarce. And, from this same perspective, I began to notice that educational rituals reflected, reinforced, and actually created belief in the value of learning pursued under conditions of scarcity. Such beliefs, arrangements, and rituals, I came to see, could easily survive and thrive under the rubrics of deschooling, free schooling, or homeschooling (which, for the most part, are limited to the commendable rejection of authoritarian methods).

What does scarcity have to do with education? If the means for learning (in general) are abundant, rather than scarce, then education never arises - one does not need to make special arrangements for "learning." If, on the other hand, the means for learning are in scarce supply, or are assumed to be scarce, then educational arrangements crop up to "ensure" that certain important knowledge, ideas, skills, attitudes, etc., are "transmitted." Education then becomes an economic commodity which one consumes, or, to use common language, which one "gets." Scarcity emerges both from our perceptions, which are massaged by education professionals who are in the business of imputing educational needs, and from actual societal arrangements that make access to tools and to skilled, knowledgeable people hard to come by—that is, scarce.¹²

If there were one thing I could wish for the readers (and some of the writers) of *Deschooling Our Lives*, it would be this: If people are seriously to think about deschooling their lives, and not just escape from the corrosive effects of compulsory schooling, they could do no better than to develop the habit of setting a mental question mark beside all discourse on young people's "educational needs" or "learning needs," or about their need for "a preparation for life." I would like them to reflect on the historicity of these very ideas. Such reflection would take the

¹² Ivan Illich, "Forward to *Deschooling Our Lives*" in *Deschooling Our Lives*, ed. Matt Hern (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 1998).

new crop of deschoolers a step further from where the younger and somewhat naive Ivan was situated, back when talk of "deschooling" was born.

In re-issuing these Illich invitations, my desire is neither to limit the creative pursuits that might inspire further contributions to our circle, nor to promote a defacto "correct" version of Illichian research, either in style or substance. Rather, in doing so I profess my own admiration for the man, his way of being in the world and being among friends, his ability to create humane and convivial spaces even within the most inhumane and inhospitable contexts, to highlight his commitment to enhancing "*eutrapelia*" (or graceful playfulness) in personal relations" in the hope that together we might approach the same.

Author's Bio

Dana Stuchul is an Assistant Professor in Curriculum and Instruction at The Pennsylvania State University, where she received her Ph.D. in Educational Theory and Policy. She is currently working on a book that examines the relevance of Ivan Illich's social critique. Her other research interests include the relationship between modernity and technology.