

DK: This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.

ARREST is a series of short pieces that use anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.

For further details about Punk Ethnography please visit www.punkethnography.org

Deschooling

I qualified as a teacher in England in 1991 and since then I have worked in primary schools, secondary schools and outdoor education in England, Hong Kong and the Netherlands. Until, that is, just a few weeks ago, in the summer of 2025, when I left my job as a school leader in the Netherlands. I have loved my work and always believed that I am contributing something positive to the world. But over the years my perception of that contribution has shifted slowly. Enumerating the positive sides of school is, at least superficially, simple. This episode, I want to focus on a critique of schooling offered by Ivan Illich, someone I mentioned in episode 4. I am making this episode to share an idea I have found arresting, and as part of reflecting on my time in schools as I think about what I do next.

Illich's concern in all his writings was the way in which institutions pervert the noble aims that inform their founding, an idea captured in the phrase "the corruption of the best is the worst." His archetype for this idea was the catholic church which he felt had compromised the loving and liberating message of the Christian faith, becoming an institution focused on priestly authority, bureaucracy, and colonialisation. He believed that the higher the aims of any endeavour, the greater the harm done by the institutions through which those initial aims are twisted.

This is the lens through which he viewed education in his book *Deschooling Society*, published in 1971. The argument of the book was that noble aims of education have been twisted and modern schools have become ways to reproduce unequal, exploitative and environmentally damaging societies. To quote Illich: *School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need society as it is.*

To outline his bold claim I want to share three key ideas from Illich.

Radical Monopoly

We are used to the word monopoly to describe a situation where one institution has the sole right to provide a good or service.

Illich uses the phrase radical monopoly to describe a more extreme situation where one system or approach is seen as the only legitimate means for providing something essential, and where alternative, informal, or traditional ways of meeting that need are devalued or made impossible.

How does this work for schooling?

Firstly, schooling is a statutory requirement and the gatekeeper for many jobs and for higher education.

If you cannot avoid school and cannot get a qualification without it and a job without the qualification, you are well on the way to making schooling the only legitimate form of education.

Schooling is also an efficient system for maintaining the structure of society. Schools in wealthier areas tend to be better resourced and get better results, international schools tend to cater to those we would call expats rather than those we would call immigrants or asylum seekers. Those students' with preferential access to schooling will have more resources devoted to them and preferential access to jobs as they leave schooling and thus greater access to the power to maintain the system in their favour.

School becomes the template for alternative educational provision- opting out, where allowed, is called home-schooling- and those routes for education that sit outside the school system adhere to the same model- microcredentials, commodified courses, programmes of study, certified qualifications, attendance certificates, grades and tests.

This makes schooling the only game in town. Illich goes on to identify how schools reproduce themselves by looking at the hidden curriculum.

Schools teach us that everything that is important is measurable- we are valuable through being measurable- from how well we read, to a measure of our well-being to the degree we do or do not have, our worth and therefore often self-worth, and the extent to which different choices are open to us is based on the numbers schools bestow upon us.

Illich objected in particular to the idea that personal development could be measured in this way saying: **“But personal growth is not a measurable entity. It is growth in disciplined dissidence, which cannot be measured against any rod, or any curriculum, nor compared to anyone else’s achievement.”**

For schools however, having determined how to measure everything we find important, we define as important everything we can measure. From this, school systems and educational suppliers can provide curriculum packages that deliver those measurable outcomes. We can offer packages to address students who perform poorly in the measurable values. We can improve a country’s standing in the PISA tests or a school’s performance in league tables. If you ask what we can do about climate change, why students are depressed, or why some become radicalised, the answer can always then be that we need more or better-targeted schooling.

The third element for Illich is that schools do not just reproduce themselves but prepare students for the way all institutions in modern societies work.

Schools teach us to be institutionalised- we are consumers of knowledge trusting that teachers know better just as we will be consumers of health care trusting doctors and of everything that the modern world has to offer as consumers for whom freedom is constituted by the choice of what to consume. Schools teach us to behave, to accept the wisdom of institutions, to value ourselves according to the norms and ratings of our societies, to accept the inequalities we see and the exploitation of weaker countries and natural resources as necessary. They teach us that progress is measurable, infinite and the ultimate good, and to believe, finally, that there is no alternative- this way of living is inevitable and unchangeable.

Illich feared that modern western schooling and thus the mechanisms through which schools have become and remain a radical monopoly that reproduces societies that need them would be exported wholesale to the global south thus destroying traditional routes for education in those countries and exacerbating global inequality, something we have seen increasingly done through the IMF, World Bank, OECD and many charities in the years since.

Summarising the dangers of radical monopolies, Illich stated: *The radical monopoly on education exercised by schools incapacitates society from recognizing its own deep-seated problems.*

So what was Illich's response?

Deschooling

When he talked about deschooling society, Illich was not talking about getting rid of schools as individual institutions. It is first and foremost a change in imagination- in what we can collectively imagine as education.

Illich states that: *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.*

Deschooling is about imagining education differently, it is about disciplined dissidence.

To dis-establish schooling would involve opening the door to seeing education as a far wider and more broadly-based process.

Crucially schools could not be compulsory. Funding would need to be equitable with the amount spent by a society on each person being independent of how rich they were to begin with, or how long they spent in institutions or what their class or race were.

Illich wanted an educational ecosystem which was non-competitive and not based on the issuing of certificates or qualifications that determined entry to a next stage of the process or into the rest of life.

So, what comes after deschooling?

Conviviality

Illich used the word 'conviviality' to talk about his vision for society, and I spoke about this in episode 4 of the arrest series.

Conviviality is about communities, human and more than human, living together in a way whereby all can thrive. By tools, Illich was referring to all institutions and technologies that humans create- our schools, cars, power stations, churches, shops and so on. It is a valuable part of Illich's insight to recognise that we cannot talk about how we live together without considering all the tools we use to do that.

Conviviality involves communities voluntarily limiting their tools, deciding together how many resources are deployed and in what direction, instead of this being imposed by the market, government, multinational corporations and lobby groups. As he said: *Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision.* He recognised conviviality as a hard choice- we would voluntarily choose to have less luxury for example in favour of a more equal, convivial society in which the whole planet and all species can thrive.

For Illich, schools are not convivial.

They also create dependency, reinforce inequality and drive out alternatives in the ways we just explored- through legal enforcement, gatekeeping educational and employment routes, and framing the very way we think about our societies.

So what would a convivial educational institution be like? Illich imagined they would provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; to make it possible for all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and to furnish all who want to present a debatable issue to the public with the opportunity to make their arguments known.

In thinking of these purposes Illich thought beyond schools to imagine **Skill centres** open to all, communally funded and creating a web of possibilities. He contrasted traditional schooling as a funnel model which used measuring of progress against preset criteria to funnel children into specific courses and jobs, with a web model that expanded ever outwards to link anyone who wanted to learn into shared networks.

He specifically talked about four different networks in this web.

Skill Exchanges allow apprenticeship between someone who can demonstrate a skill and another who wishes to learn it.

Peer-Matching networks connects students with fellow learners with similar interests who can then together seek ways to learn together.

Everyone should have **Access to Professional Educators**, people - he used the phrase educators-at-large- who have shown themselves to be masters of their craft and would be responsible for operating the aforementioned networks. They would also be there for students who seek assistance in reaching their educational goals and the kinds of roles we might see ourselves in.

I find most enlightening his idea of repositories of **Educational Objects**, referring to tool shops, libraries, labs, practice rooms, arts and craft workshops, which serve to empower people to explore subjects they would have previously had to make a major monetary commitment to. Crucial in this is the accessibility built into our tools. Tools implicitly educate their users and those with too much complexity or proprietorial control educate us to be passive. Interoperability, repairability, modularity, accessibility and lo-fi solutions are fundamental to conviviality. Communities may well decide that some technological advances were undesirable when they did not fit these criteria.

The idea of educational objects illuminates the ways in which education is built into our tools, and is the responsibility of all, not the monopoly of schools.

Comparing libraries and schools here illuminates his contrast.

Schools require attendance at set times and teach children to a set curriculum which they are required to complete and be tested on to access further education or jobs. Schools tell pupils what to be interested in and when and create a clear hierarchy of power. We are all taught that school is the only legitimate source of education and prepare them for a world where they must similarly accept the status quo as it is without question.

In contrast libraries- of books, tools, skills, arts, crafts or whatever else- open up access and enable people of all kinds to pursue their interests. People can come and go as they please and receive the necessary support to follow their interests and ask whatever questions they want.

Writing in the 70s, Illich anticipates some developments such as MOOCs, YouTube learning tutorials, activist skill exchanges, repair cafes and would have comments to make about maintaining them as free, accessible and unmeasured spaces.

I said at the outset that I thought outlining the positive sides of schooling was superficially easy. I have seen schools as places fundamental to the communities they serve and help create, as pivotal to creating a vibrant, participative citizenry and places of learning, humour, joy and creativity. Illich would challenge me that this is something education can and should be but that schooling may be the very

antithesis of, and a lived answer to this arresting challenge is what I want to find next.

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