



THE MIKI KASHTAN COLUMN

Deschooling Ourselves: Experiments with Learning and Liberation

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Teaching, reading and writing for a post-patriarchal world

I had the amazing good fortune to see Ivan Illich in person not too long before he died. What he spoke of that evening is long gone from my memory. What has stayed to this day is the visceral experience of seeing the big tumour on his face, which I understood as a defiant act of human dignity. I didn't know at the time that his cancer had been diagnosed in the 1980s, that he remained dedicated to his work while accepting ongoing pain for many years, and that his refusal to receive conventional medical treatment was an active surrender to and acceptance of pain and suffering as part of life, a meeting place between his social critique of medicine and his own life story, a reminder that the choice to live our convictions remains a possibility even in difficult circumstances.

I read *Deschooling Society*, to which this article mostly orients, twice. The first time was in Hebrew when I was 17, around the time of forming my own refusal to participate in the society I was part of at the time. The second time was to refresh my memory in preparation for writing this article, finding in it a compelling way to frame the context for the community-learning experiments I write about here.

Why Deschooling Society?

Modern non-military institutions, says Illich, 'create needs faster than they can create satisfaction, and in the process of trying to meet the needs they generate, they consume the Earth'.¹ This is a devastating and succinct rendition of the material dilemma of modern institutions, written about decades before the realities of planetary limits have become common knowledge.

Nor are the impacts only material. Within the context of modern institutions, and most especially schools, 'people lose their incentive to grow in independence; they no longer find relatedness attractive, and close themselves off to the surprises that life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional definition'.² This corresponds, fully (though in reverse order), to the three losses that living in patriarchal societies brings about: loss of flow to scarcity, loss of togetherness to separation, and loss of choice to powerlessness. I join fully with Illich in recognising that our very survival, both material and even more so spiritual, requires us to reverse these shifts, and to find, again, choice, togetherness and flow. Writing in 2022 rather than in 1971, during the surge of

hope and possibility that swept around many parts of the world, I am deeply agnostic about whether we will find a way.

The Path to Deschooling

Although Illich was at odds with every aspect of modernity and all its institutions, and challenged just about every single one of them in the books that followed *Deschooling Society*, he chose the institution of school as the first, because he saw it as both an example of the phenomenon and the prime way that it is reproduced. Illich went beyond critique only, and laid out, in some detail, the principles and building blocks of what learning could look like in the absence of schooling. When I wrote *Reweaving Our Human Fabric*,³ where I included fictional stories and some principles about a possible future society, I didn't include anything about learning or education, because I considered what Illich wrote to be sufficient. He included both specific structural elements and thoughts about how we would need to orient to what he called 'the nature of human life' in order to be able to function within a deschooled society.

Illich dedicated a full chapter in his book to the former. He named them 'learning webs', and they include 'things, models, peers, and elders'.⁴ These correspond to the material elements we would want to learn about; the people who could teach us specific skills for using the 'things'; people to learn with, absent 'teachers', all that we want to learn that isn't specific skills; and actual leaders and masters with whom we could enter into learning relationships. Although scant and quite abstract, I still believe that what he has in that chapter is indeed enough on the structural level.

When it comes to how we would shift our orientation to fit what is needed for functioning within a deschooled society, Illich wrote much less. He says, for example, that we 'must choose whether to be rich in things or in the freedom to use them'.⁵ And yet he offers no specific pathways for what we can

do, either as individuals or within communities, to make that shift.

The impression I am left with is that he believed that shifting the systemic context and providing us with opportunities to self-direct our learning would be enough for us to find sufficient choice to become full participants. In my mind, this belief, which I see as similar to that of Marx, neglects to look at the internalisation of modern conditioning, even though his critique speaks so deeply about how schooling is the prime location for this conditioning.

From Concept to Practice

I am not aware of any experimentation that has taken Illich's proposals and applied them in aiming to build an actual learning web, and am happy to imagine that at least some have been implemented with lessons learned.⁶ In the remainder of this article, I am focusing on one such experiment that I have been instrumental in bringing into existence. Through this exploration, I bring a magnifying glass, in particular, to the conceptual and practical gap in the theory. My hope is to inspire more people to engage in more such experimentation, informed with deeper understanding of what is needed in order for learning webs to flourish, even while the existing social order remains and encroaches on them.

The experiment has been deeply (though not sufficiently explicitly) informed by some of the principles I picked up from Illich, complemented by what I learned from Paulo Freire and about consciousness-raising groups during the heyday of Second Wave Feminism.

The Context: A Learning Experiment with a Large Vision

The experimentation I am talking about here has been unfolding within the Nonviolent Global Liberation (NGL) community.⁷ NGL functions as an online community, with periodic gatherings of different subsets of its members. At its inception in 2017, we had an

explicit intention for NGL to function as a learning community and apprenticeship programme within a particular area of learning and application. This area is a framework⁸ for learning and action, oriented towards a particular vision based on putting human needs at the centre and orienting, in full choice and full togetherness, to attending to all needs within willingness and capacity (including earth's capacity).⁹

In looking at Illich's four elements, the 'things' available to people within NGL to learn about and with are, mostly, written and recorded materials.¹⁰ The 'models' are mostly people who are further along the path of learning and application than some others, and who are available to offer instruction, coaching and support.¹¹ The 'peers' are all those who are engaging with this community which, at present, is about 350 people, many more than when we started. The 'elders' are mostly me, though a small group of people have integrated the framework and have had enough of their own experience in applying it within and outside the community to be able to speak fully from within their own authority. In addition, there is an active and explicit project aiming to capture what we refer to as my 'non-redundant capacities', so that when I die or even before, others can step in to attend to this need within the community.

My understanding of what a full learning web would be, based on Illich's writings, is that everything under the sun can be learned within it, so long as there are enough people who want to learn it, and enough resources available to them in support of their learning. In that way, we are not a full learning web. We are only engaging in learning in some specific areas mostly related to how humans organise their affairs and function to attend to their own and others' needs, with the least reliance possible on current institutional forms, states and markets. We are not (yet?) growing food or producing anything, and we don't organise learning in these areas or anything else that is on the physical plane.

Experimentation is a core element of our purpose, which means that our orientation to learning is intertwined with other experiments we have been engaging with. There are quite a number of such experiments going on within NGL, both in relation to how we ourselves function and in relation to what we bring to others from what we discover. Three are particularly relevant to both our learning and to the larger concerns that Illich raised (and which I believe he would be excited to hear about):

- We distribute all leadership and decision making.
- We operate as a full gift economy both within the community and in our dealings with others. (This is with the exception of institutional entities, which we keep as much to a minimum as is possible while living in the world as it is.)
- We are taking active steps towards the establishment of physical communities aimed to restore the commons and to live in full shared risk.

Results: Limited Self-organised Learning

NGL is my second attempt to establish a learning community working towards liberation and a vision that is both radical and practical. The first one, also intended to be largely self-organised, broke down after two years based on intractable conflict. NGL is now in its sixth year. Like the previous experiment, we have been functioning with a major conflict field for the last three years. Unlike the previous one, we are responding with significant though imperfect transparency and co-holding of the impacts of the conflict. What's even more amazing to me is that we are still managing to engage in other experiments and to sustain and operate the community.

Our experimentation in the three areas I mentioned earlier is bearing astonishing fruit, especially the focus on the gift economy, and the principle of resources flowing from where they exist to where they are needed based on

willingness and within purpose. About 30 people now sustain themselves in whole or part based on freely given gifts of money. We are doing this entirely without bosses, employees or a board, and with minimal interactions with the existing systems. Within this, given that what has come to us has been less than what we have requested, all of us have needed to adjust our consumption to available means, an unintended gift given that we are all aware that current patterns of consumption are inherently unsustainable.

Still, within all this breath-taking movement, the learning aspect of our experimentation has been lagging behind. Here are a few specific aspects of what I mean by that.

- After five years, and even with completing a two-year programme for people who expressed their interest in becoming providers within our learning framework, only a small handful of the more than 60 who participated at least in part of the programme have taken steps towards sharing the content with others.
- All our work has been self-organised. We have upwards of 20 teams functioning in fully self-directed ways. And even with that, self-organising for purposes of learning itself hardly happens. This is true both within the two-year programme, where opportunities were specifically laid out for that to happen with support, and elsewhere within NGL.
- Everything that happens within NGL is chosen, and nothing is mandatory. This includes all learning events. For much of NGL's existence, even though people are there because they value the overall experiment and about 50 people are active within the community, very few show up for learning events, including those I offer, which is in stark contrast to learning events I offer outside of NGL, where I regularly have upwards of 100 people. It's possible that this reflects how much learning happens, organically, in the work itself. And, still, there is little happening even in terms of coming together for reflection, to articulate

principles, to write up case studies, or to debrief personal learnings with others.

- Despite inviting people to be proactive in their own learning, to choose what they want to focus on, to participate in holding and designing what happens, including within the two-year programme, and to engage in active experimentation and application within and outside of NGL, it appears clear that in subtle and sometimes blunt ways, the consumption model of learning continues to operate. It may well be that building capacity for modelling and coaching is a necessary step in the recovery process. We are still investigating this question.

Making Sense of It: The Dilemmas of Liberation

Ivan Illich himself named the challenge that I believe is at the heart of the results we are experiencing: 'The creature whom schools need as a client has neither the autonomy nor the motivation to grow on [their] own.'¹² Schools, I believe, don't only need this creature; they also manufacture it from the little beings who love learning until they enter school earlier and earlier in their lives, segregated from all other people for many hours a day except a small group of those in the same age as they are, and subject to all the manipulation, coercion and shaming that schools produce.

The last time I did a training in Nonviolent Communication for schoolteachers, I asked them to name what needs of children they were aiming to attend to. There were many needs named, all of which I resonated with. There was also a resounding absence of any mention of autonomy. These individuals didn't see it as part of their responsibility to support children's autonomy. Given my experiences with thousands of people since I started teaching the liberatory practice of Nonviolent Communication in 1996, I believe either that the capacity of schools to take the soul out of us has intensified since the 1970s, or that Illich underestimated the depth of internalisation that remains, even when

external circumstances change. He believed that when people ‘have new choices, new chances for learning.... we may expect that they will experience more deeply both their own independence and their need for guidance.’¹³ This implies that the only liberation we need is ‘from manipulation by others’.¹⁴

Though I believe, along with many others, that much of what we want to learn is within us and only requires that we access it beneath the layers of internalisation, I see at least two essential areas of learning that require active engagement with and from others, and which are unlikely to happen fully from within. One is, ironically, the kind of information that Illich himself wrote about: the history of the political and economic contexts that gave rise to our current predicaments. The more successful is the indoctrination of institutions, the less likely any of us are to imagine anything other than what we have as being possible, and thus to problematise what we have.

The other kind of learning that remains elusive within the existing social order is the capacity to reflect critically on the conditions of our existence. This is where lessons from Paulo Freire become significant. Although Freire and those who worked with him never interfered with the learning of those they engaged with, they provided more than an opportunity for people to come together to learn on their own. They also provided consultants who offered framing and critical reflection, and supported the emergence of critical consciousness. This is the process of *conscientisation*. Second Wave feminists are a complex example, in part because many of the early ones had been previously involved in the civil rights movement and came into feminism already primed for self-reflection. Liberation requires support, and is usually passed on rather than being spontaneously discovered. Here is where the interaction between our learning and the other experiments within NGL provides clues to

what may support learning webs like ours to flourish.

The experiment with functioning on the basis of gifting, with any exchange absent, was somewhat challenged until the team that administers the experimentation began to reach out to and engage individually with all the people who are in a position to make requests for money, given their involvement with the work. This is because the shift from exchange to gifting is more than most people can do on their own without support. This has implications for self-organised learning, which requires a huge amount of capacity for autonomy, and for taking ourselves and our needs seriously enough to take initiative. It may be, as we are now coming to realise, that the initial steps of seeding a learning web and activating it with sufficient flow and togetherness to sustain itself without ongoing active reaching out may need to only include people who have already recovered their capacity for choice. This is something we are still exploring.

As we look at the people who have most benefited from the two-year programme and whose learning and integration proceeded in leaps and bounds, those tended to be people who involved themselves, in addition to the programme, with the actual work of sustaining both the programme and the community as a whole. They joined other teams and had the actual lived experience of what the work is about in actual and significant interaction with others who are similarly committed. It seems to me, as we are wrapping up an experiment of two years, that any future learning experiments will need to integrate this insight. If, as Illich said – and I agree – ‘our future depends on our deliberately choosing a life of action over a life of consumption’,¹⁵ perhaps this means that changing only how learning is done is simply not enough.

My deepest conclusion, then, is that liberation from the constraints of mainstream thinking doesn’t happen by itself, and we cannot do it

alone. If we don't do enough of it, the learning remains a form of consumption. We need to connect with each other to consciously choose, together, to deschool ourselves and each other, and to embed learning within actively living now the way we want life to be for all of us. Then we may become islands of liberation, embracing a life in which learning and action are inseparable, so that learning comes from life itself and from each other, as we regain capacity for choice and togetherness and humbly take steps towards the largest vision possible we can imagine to realign humanity with the flow of life.

Notes and References

- 1 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society*, Calder & Boyars, London, 1971, p. 110.
- 2 Op. cit., p. 42.
- 3 Miki Kashtan, *Reweaving Our Human Fabric: Working Together to Create a Nonviolent Future*, Fearless Heart Publications, Oakland, Calif., 2015.
- 4 *Deschooling Society*, op. cit., p. 76.
- 5 Op. Cit., p. 62.
- 6 I looked up the *International Journal of Illich Studies* and searched for 'learning web' and for 'learning network', and found little that was relevant to what I am looking into here. The closest was 'Critical thinking and convivial learning in Central China', published by Roger Shouse and Jinyan Bai in Vol. 6 No. 1 (2018), documenting an emergent phenomenon rather than an ongoing attempt to support the functioning of a learning web. In no way do I mean this to minimise the significance of what the authors participated in; only to point to it being, primarily, a one-time offering to a certain group of people which wasn't self-organised or self-directed. I am not personally considering the democratic-schools network a far enough step away from regular schools. Some of the unschooling networks go some steps towards what's missing, in that the adults also learn with the younger people, not only do the 'teaching'.
- 7 See the website for more information: <http://nglcommunity.org>. Our purpose is 'integrating nonviolence into the fabric of human life through ongoing live experiments with truth focused on individual and collective liberation'. (Notes on the terms can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/2kz8jr93>.)
- 8 See <http://tinyurl.com/5fm54cb8> for a dense description of the framework.
- 9 I am aware that Illich had a critical perspective on needs. A full engagement with his perspective is quite beyond the scope of a short article like this. I am quite confident that there isn't actually any contradiction between his critique and my own embracing of needs. The understanding of human needs that is at the heart of my approach rests on Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication, and can be found in Chapter 9 of my unpublished dissertation which is publicly available: 'Beyond Reason: Reconciling Emotion with Social Theory' (preview available at <http://tinyurl.com/235ay83z>). The bridge between the two is that much if not all of what Illich critiques would be considered strategies to attend to needs rather than, themselves, being needs.
- 10 Almost everything available is listed on the Fearless Heart website (<https://thefearlessheart.org/>), where everything is either free or based on gift models where people give money only if they can do so without overstressing or resentment.
- 11 One of the limitations we encountered is that very few of the people within the programme and within the larger community either had enough capacities to coach others or enough self-trust to step into that kind of leadership.
- 12 Op. cit., p. 104.
- 13 Op. cit., p. 97.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Op. cit., p. 52.

About the contributor



Miki Kashtan is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation community (www.NGLcommunity.org) and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects

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