Ivan Illich: *Deschooling Society*
Schooling for Consumerism

With education the mess that it is not only in South Africa but everywhere, it is time to revisit Ivan Illich who, in his book *Deschooling Society*, warned us in 1970 of the harmful effects of schooling, especially on the poor. Today we complain about the illiteracy of graduates from high schools, we see the malaise of students, we see criminal behaviour in schools and we blame all of these on poverty, apartheid and other social evils but we overlook the evil that school itself presents.

According to Illich, we have bought into a number of myths about education – the fundamental one being that learning is the result of instruction. **But learning is not the result of instruction**. Learning is self-motivated and happens informally through observation, experimentation, experience and self-regulated study. And it is both problem-solving and goal-oriented. Real learning occurs when learners have real problems to solve.

It was recognised a long time ago, and especially at the time that Illich was writing, that school is modelled on the factory; that students are the raw material processed on the conveyer belt of graduated learning. Students do not create their own curricula but have standardised curricula imposed on them. They are treated as all the same and therefore can be mass-produced; sameness is confused with equality. Differences have to be processed out because the curriculum and instruction are standardised. Standardisation is necessary because we are dealing with students *en masse* and we have to ensure that students as products can move from the institution of the school into institutions of employment that require guarantees that they will fit into their modes of production. So certificates, the stamps of guarantee, are awarded to verify that they have been properly manufactured. But as instruction does not guarantee learning, certificates do not always assure the quality of products or their suitability for the new conveyer belt awaiting them in society.

Schools knock out individuality. In the Freedom Charter, one of the rights promised is the right to education but schools impose a standardised curriculum and standardised text-books on students. Schools ignore the interests of students and do not allow for individual curricula and self-motivated ways to acquire learning. The school system, therefore, is really unconstitutional because it commodifies students and turns them away from education that leads to individual growth. Education, therefore, is not free and fair. It is an alienating process; it alienates the student from whom s/he is and force-feeds her/him to become a tool of society. That is not freedom. "Alienation in the traditional scheme was a direct consequence of work becoming wage-labour which deprived man of the opportunity to create and be re-created." (Illich, 34) Furthermore, schools turn students into consumers for life. That is what life-long learning in academic institutions means. "No one completes school—yet. It never closes its doors on anyone without offering him one more chance: at remedial, adult, and continuing education." (Illich, 32)

"School combines the expectations of the consumer expressed in its claims with the beliefs of the producer expressed in its ritual. It is a liturgical expression of a world-wide "cargo cult." (Illich: "Schooling: The Ritual Process" *Deschooling Society, 33)*

Because schooling has become a ritual process, it is taken for granted and not questioned. School, however, as an institution has all the characteristics of a dehumanising bureaucracy; it seeks to control, control, control – through curriculum, timetable, confining students to classrooms and age groups, restricting free movement and mediating learning through a teacher. School is based on "the modern concept of `progress,' which means the principle of ever-increasing production, consumption, timesaving, maximal efficiency and profit, and calculability of economic activities without regard to their effect on the quality of living and the unfolding of man; …" (Erich Fromm, "Introduction," *Celebration of Awareness,* Ivan Illich,)

What is needed is to free education from the school institution and its hidden curriculum (turning students into life-long consumers, i.e., into dependents.) If we look at the US, the recent financial crisis has revealed great dependence on consumerism and has left many people with

a sense of helplessness. Because of its ritualization, education is not recognised as a major contributory factor to the recession. If President Obama is to restore the economy, he needs to look at the real causes of the economic collapse.

"We cannot go beyond the consumer society unless we first understand that obligatory public schools inevitably reproduce such a society, no matter what is taught in them." (Illich,) This is a reference to the power of the hidden curriculum.

How do we De-institutionalise Education?

For real education, we have to get rid of schools.

The idea of abolishing schools was terrifying in 1970 and may still be so despite the fact that schools are still failing the majority of poor students and we have tremendous skill shortages. Educators in particular find deschooling ridiculous because it means empowering students and reducing educators' control of students and learning.

According to Illich, "The planning of new educational institutions ought not to begin with the administrative goals of a principal or president, or with the teaching goals of a professional educator, or with the learning goals of any hypothetical class of people. It must not start with the question, "What should someone learn?" but with the question, "What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" Illich wants education to be placed squarely in the hands of the learner. In South Africa, we have substituted the word learner for pupil/student but we have not entitled the pupil/student to decide on what and how s/he wants to learn. Illich seeks to empower the learner, giving her/him control over her/his learning That would make the term "learner" authentic.

He suggests four strategies:

1. **1.Reference Services to Educational Objects – which facilitate access to things or processes used for formal learning. Some of these things can be reserved for this purpose, stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories and showrooms like museums and theatres; others can be in daily use in factories, airports, or on farms, but made available to students as apprentices or on off hours. (58)**

Learning would thus take place in the community and not in a confined classroom.

1. **2.Skill Exchanges – which permit persons to list their skills, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills, and the addresses at which they can be reached. (58)**

Learners would choose the most appropriate educators for their personal need and would be learning from all kinds of skilled experts, in proper learning environments.

1. **3.Peer-Matching – 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. (58)**

Learners would create their own learning groups based on their personal interests and learning would be based on the problems that they wish to solve. They would not be stuck in a classroom with pupils all of the same age being forced into the same course of study chosen by some arcane authority. They would be engaged in acquiring the skills and knowledge that they need and with people of all ages who have the same interest. These would not be permanent groups. Once their objectives are achieved, they move on into new groups in different venues to learn other skills and acquire other knowledge relevant to their needs.

1. **4.Reference Services 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. Such educators, as we will see, could be chosen by polling and consulting with former clients. (58)**

Learners will be free to choose the educators who can best guide them. Educators would thus have to prove their competence to learners, not to some official who cannot really determine the effectiveness of the interaction between educator and learner and has to look at exam results to decide on competence. The educator's competence will be determined by the learners. If they are not benefitting they will from an educator they will move on to the next.

Outcomes Based Education (OBE) tried to implement some of these principles, such as empowerment of learners, facilitation rather than instruction, working with objects. But OBE did not have a chance for success as it was introduced into the mass production school environment of standardisation into which it does not fit. [Steven Covey's 7 *Principles of Highly Effective People*   is much admired. What most people cannot see is the correlation between his ideas and OBE. His goal-oriented principles work because they are applied to the work environment.] That is exactly what Ivan Illich proposes, goal-oriented learning in real environments. Illich's learners, guided by experts chosen by themselves, form their own learning groups that are of all ages and all walks of life and have a common goal.

With courage, we could implement real education for our learners through deschooling. Interacting with real professionals in the environment and making use of the resources that it offers, learners would gain clear ideas about careers and be able to make appropriate choices. Incentives, such as money and power would still be there to encourage them to venture into a variety of fields. Many may still choose soft options but as they will have real, not the simulated exposure offered in classrooms and school laboratories, there probably would be as many, maybe more, opting for careers in science, technology, engineering and other areas in which we suffer skill shortages.

Leraning, as Illich reminds us, happens around problem-solving. Our big problem today is how do we change our education system so that it meets the needs of individuals who want to create their own niche in society. How do we stop programming students and allow them the freedom of choice to develop their talents and interests so that they can make their own self-chosen contributions to society.