

# Ivan Illich and The Public Library

by Robert E. Watson  
George Peabody College  
Nashville, Tennessee

Ivan Illich is the author of several radical critiques of contemporary schooling and society; among them *Tools for Conviviality* and *Deschooling Society*.<sup>1</sup> He has been hailed as an important new voice and condemned as an irresponsible interloper. Whatever the case may be for or against the present educational system, his ideas are important to those librarians whose job it is to close the gaps left by the standardized process.

Illich directs his work to education as a whole, something the public library has neither the funds to transform nor the current inclination. Yet his ideas are extremely relevant to the established library conception of informal adult education. The following is an attempt to open up some possibilities for actions that are properly within the library realm.

Illich establishes two categories for "tools," which may be institutions, or anything else, which make the process of living more humane and enjoyable. These are "convivial" and "non-convivial." A convivial tool is one that is truly in the hands of the individual user. It is a tool which does not force restructuring upon the user due to its inherent characteristics. A bicycle is more convivial than a car: the latter requires wide roads, heavy machinery, and forces the individual into stress to cope with both its speed and its expense.

Yet,

At its best the library is the prototype of a convivial tool. Repositories for other learning tools can be organized on its model, expanding access to tapes, pictures, records, and very simple labs filled with the same scientific

instruments with which most of the major breakthroughs of the last century were made.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the public library is currently limited largely to materials of adult interest and cannot compete with the local school. But this in no way precludes a nearly total state of conviviality for the adult learner. To the largest degree, this is the purpose of the public library, and has been such since its beginnings. It perhaps should be said that the public library has always been a convivial tool, for, in the words of Frank Jessup,

it is open to all, it is free (or if not free is inexpensive), it imposes no entrance tests, it is immune from competitive pressures, its atmosphere is conducive to security as opposed to the insecurity by which some adults feel themselves threatened in classes where they might be expected to vie with other students. At the library the "adult self-teacher" is not bound by an institutional time-table, by set dates for the beginning and the end of the session or semester; he can begin where he likes, determine his own curriculum, formally or informally, amend it according to his developing interests, proceed at his own pace, and continue for so long as the study seems profitable to pursue.<sup>3</sup>

This has been the ideal for years, while most attempts to coordinate formally adult education efforts with the library have failed.<sup>4</sup> While this is certainly a dismal realization, there is still a certain amount of hope. In adult education, experimentation and imagination have often proved to be the best approach when combined with freedom from central control.<sup>5</sup>

In *Deschooling Society*, Illich offers a series of "learning webs," which could be used (some might say co-opted) by the library to coordinate and facilitate a great deal of a community's informal adult education.

1. Reference Service 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 theaters; others can be in daily use in factories,

airports, or on farms, but made available to students as apprentices or on off-hours.<sup>6</sup>

Such a "Reference Service" is not too far beyond normal reference work: it is merely an extension of knowing where a particular type of information, an object or tool, is available in a community. Some educational objects are already stored in libraries: projectors, record players, audio and video tapes, and cameras, not to mention the wealth of books. Others need to be searched out. The greatest difficulty would lie in the willingness of people to cooperate, and probably could not be done by the library alone, although the library should properly be the center for such information.

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.<sup>7</sup>

The public library would again serve as the local information center, helping to list skill instructors and to match them with their prospective students. The current difficulty would be to find instructors and to convince them that what they know is worth teaching. This presently lies outside the proper bounds of most public libraries unless they are quite obviously surrounded by willing teachers.

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.<sup>8</sup>

This is the learning web to which libraries can now most easily attend. Again, the library would be the central information source, coordinating students and making the first contact between them. Beyond this it would have no formal involvement. Yet, if there are students, it is a necessity to have information: the library. With such a system in service, library circulation is apt to increase, though

by an unknown amount. It would seem inevitable.

A technique to start the network could be worked out with the local newspapers. Most libraries have excellent relations with them, preparing articles featuring planned activities, new books, and book reviews. A coupon could easily be included, to be filled in with name, address, phone number, and interest(s).

There are two major objections: population and library manpower. If the town is too small, the service would have to be expanded to a system, at the expense of individual convenience. If a city is too large, there would be the necessity of hiring new staff members. Both objections can be overcome, or may only be apparent. In many towns of less than 10,000 there are individuals with widely ranging interests; while matters of funding have been overcome many times in the past.

4. Reference Services to Educators-at-large — who can be listed in a directory giving the addresses and self-descriptions of professionals, para-professionals, and free-lancers, along with conditions of access to their services. Such educators . . . could be chosen by polling or consulting their former clients.<sup>9</sup>

The public library already gives this service to some degree, particularly on the national scale. But Illich refers to the local level and to his new vision of society. The best that libraries can do now is similar to what can be done for Skill Exchanges: listings and coordination. Some persons who are not teachers in the current sense could be listed by consensus, as indicated in the last sentence quoted above.

Illich is not alone in his vision of society. Schools similar to his "learning webs" have been proposed by other dedicated critics of the present educational system.<sup>10</sup> But insofar as what Illich proposes is curiously close to the ideals of library service, public libraries have succeeded in almost nothing.<sup>11</sup>

They can succeed in the future.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harrow Books, 1971).

Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Perennial Library, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup>Frank W. Jessup, "Librarians and Adult Education," *UNESCO BULLETIN FOR LIBRARIES*, XXVII, no. 6 (Nov.-Dec. 1973), p. 310.

<sup>4</sup>Wilbur C. Hallenbeck et al., *Community and Adult Education* (Chicago: Adult Education Association of the USA, 1962), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Jack R. Gibb, "Learning Theory in Adult Education," *Handbook of Adult Education in the United States*, ed. Malcolm S. Knowles (Chicago: Adult Education Association of the USA, 1960), p. 62.

<sup>6</sup>Illich, *Deschooling Society*, pp. 112-113.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *The Soft Revolution* (New York: Delta, 1971), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup>Leo N. Flanagan, "Disestablishing the School and the Public Library: the Ideas of Ivan Illich Applied to Libraries," *CALIFORNIA LIBRARIAN*, XXXV (April, 1974), p. 47.

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