

Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader

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Reviewed by Kirsten Olson

When I first assign Grace Llewellyn's *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How To Quit School and Get A Real Life and Education* to my undergraduates in education, they are stunned, shocked, and repelled by Llewellyn's message. Although most have just completed American high school, an experience they found intellectually draining, emotionally flattening, and at least a year and a half too long, they write in their first autobiographical essays for my class, "Never in my entire life have I read a book that said education could be bad for you." In discussion they shake their heads and say, "Some kids might learn without school, but this is definitely not for everybody."

In the early 1970s Ivan Illich asked why so many people—even ardent critics of schooling—became addicted to education as if to a drug. This is one of the big questions that animates Matt Hern's new reader, *Everywhere All The Time: A New Deschooling Reader*, a collection of 37 deschooling and alternative schooling essays from the greats (Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Illich, John Holt), to newer and more self-consciously "global" accounts of democratic schools around the world. Homeschoolers, deschoolers, those who are just beginning to fledglingly critique the education gospel need bucking up, and courage in numbers, as they begin to travel to the outposts far margins of de-institutionalized learning. Hern's reader attempts to guide them there, with assurances that people you've heard of came to regard school as psychically diminishing, colonizing and fundamentally about control ("Education is the action of one man upon another for the purpose of making the person under education acquire certain moral habits..."¹ wrote Tolstoy in the 1860s, in an essay that kicks off the reader), and that smart young folk such as Hern himself have successfully established new kinds of learning centers (Purple Thistle Center in East Vancouver) where teenagers can go, get away from adults, run their own learning collectives, and teach themselves what they really need to know. While Illich gently suggested, in his original introduction to the first edition of this reader in 1995, that those in the deschooling and homeschooling movement were perhaps still too "school centric" in their critiques, and had not freed their thinking sufficiently from these institutional paradigms—they were still acting out around the "bad parents" that schooling represents and that he himself had moved on—Illich would surely have approved of Hern's central assertion, stated here: "We just can't be waiting for politicians, administrators, leaders, or anyone else: we need to be building everyday alternatives right now, right where we live."² We've got to get on with establishing new kinds of learning alternatives that are not compulsory, not ideological expressions of the state, and not state funded. Otherwise, we're screwed.

Matt Hern, a popular and colorful figure in the deschooling movement who makes something of a point of being cool, casual, using the word "fuck," and shooting his mouth off (don't all movements need figures like him—but what happens when he reaches AARP age?), has updated his popular—now "classic" deschooling reader with several new essays, many more global and a few academic perspectives, and importantly, voices from unschooled students. (A whole new "whack" of essays, in Hern's words.) The updated work is now less an unschooling

¹ Matt Hern, ed., *Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2008), 5.

² Ibid, 116.

how-to and more of a philosophical, global investigation of the problems of compulsory schooling. Is schooling necessary? Why do people think so? Why is there resistance to seeing the effects of schooling on so many people? From what paradigm do we constitute the necessity of schooling (scarcity, and the need for control). As the reader takes its name from Illich—Illich actually believed that schools should be “disestablished,” not society deschooled (meaning schools should be divested of their totemic power, special privileges and public funding)—the volume remains strongly Illich-influenced: a passionately argued set of essays about the ways in which, as a society, we are all schooled up, and have trouble rethinking what our culture might look like if we didn’t have “compulsion schooling at the end of a state bayonet,” pokes John Taylor Gatto.³

So some of the essays try to sketch this out. In India, Shilpa Jain describes Shikshantar, an organic learning community that hosts learning activists, not teachers, who, along with the community, explore questions that are important to them and also deeply tied to the real concerns of the larger village. “All work is flexible and shared,” writes Jain, “and we take the time to give feedback and support each other’s work as it develops.”⁴ In another essay, over at the long-running Windsor House School in North Vancouver, the school’s current leaders explain that they are willing to be directive about everything but student learning. “The philosophical bedrock on which Windsor House rests is non-coercive education, the belief that that human beings will eagerly learn what they are interested in learning, and resent being forced to do, say, think, or learn anything that does not interest them,” observes Meghan Hughes and Jim Carrico.⁵ The vision of the person that underlies deschooling and unschooling—the natural learner, free, unencumbered by fear and institutional dehumanization, set abroad in the rich and abundant learning environment that is the world—is at the heart of many of the readings in this collection. “People are learners,”⁶ says Mimsy Sadofsky, founder of the Sudbury Valley School in her essay, or “Learning is like breathing. It is a natural, human activity: it is part of being alive,” writes Aaron Falbel.⁷ Most schools just get in the way. This is a fundamental catechism of unschooling—*Learning is natural, Schooling is optional*, in the words of an unschooling bumpersticker, and authoritarianism and control in learning don’t produce good results for anyone, not individuals or society.

But is schooling actually optional for everyone? Is everyone’s environment a rich array of possible, nearly enchanting, learning experiences, a cabinet of curiosities with meanings awaiting the ready mind to explore and unpack? One of the problems of this reader, and I’d say of the unschooling, deschooling and alternative education movements in general at the moment, is a kind of intellectual compression and a lack of real engagement with important questions about the relationship between education and social class—acquisition of the master’s tools—and whether having cultural capital doesn’t make it just a little bit easier to diss school. Matt Hern and many of his deschooling colleagues (I include myself here) already have advanced degrees from high status academic institutions, or teach at them. This may make it just a bit easier to say that those degrees don’t matter than for someone who has never had the opportunity to get them, or who suffers the consequences day to day in an employment market without them. Illich’s own scholarly achievements and academic degrees, occasional high-handed

³ Ibid, 55.

⁴ Ibid, 205-204.

⁵ Ibid, 166.

⁶ Ibid, 159.

⁷ Ibid, 62.

intellectualism and superciliousness, were very much a part of how he presented to the world, even as he roamed the world as a barefoot, possessionless priest.

The deschooling movement has long suffered from marginalization and disparagement from mainstream educators, and many of the viewpoints represented in the reader make the same points echoingly—as if products of too many late night bull sessions with the same sets of folks. Authoritarian control of the human mechanism is bad, and institutionalized education is an expression of control—these observations tend to be repeated again and again, *like we have to keep saying this over and over, so someone will finally hear us and believe us*. How colonization occurs, how we tend to become strangely sympathetic to and reliant on those mechanisms that oppress us—how they become normal—is not the stuff of these essays. To paraphrase Illich, why do we pull the lid closed on our own coffins? There is also not a single homeschooling voice represented here who is African American, urban, or chronically poor; there is no engagement in the Lisa Delpit argument that sometimes, for the purposes of social justice, you just have to flat out compel kids to learn to read and write a coherent essay and put together an Excel spreadsheet. (It’s hard to dismantle the master’s house without the skills to write and think and talk it into the ground.) Although Daniel Grego’s essay thoughtfully touches on the fact that if we are stuck in *this* society, one where “economic opportunities are divvied up according to school credentials”⁸ and as long as schools deliberately create a class of untouchables who are intended to “slap hamburgers at McDonalds,” and “drive buses,” then we have to talk about privilege, political power and entitlement.⁹ Mostly, the question of social class and how it relates to the capacity *to chose not to school* is undiscussed. To this point, the reader glaringly ignores overwhelming socioeconomic data that the more years you are in school, the higher your earnings are going to be—and the fact that this may be important to some people. Why pretend this doesn’t matter?

Like Matt Hern, I believe momentum for unschooling and deschooling is growing hugely and broadly, but not because we—all of us, this excellent reader included—have been so ardent and articulate at pointing out the flaws of compulsory education. As Illich might have predicted, new *tools* have changed the paradigm. With the advent of the internet, the usual assumptions about who gets access to knowledge—who owns it, how it is produced, who is authorized to “legitimate” it, what “it” actually is—are radically altering. Thus the cultural meanings of educational institutions, teaching, and the role of the student are also radically transforming—although most school systems haven’t yet caught on to this. Kids really don’t need school anymore, and they are figuring that out hour by hour with their own new, networked tools. Soon they are just going to walk right out of the classroom altogether, unless institutionalized education changes.

A new reader might catch that wave, Matt?

Author’s Bio

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⁸ Ibid, 79.

⁹ Ibid, 78.