

Evaluating the Use of “Deschooled” Methods in A Postgraduate Teaching Assessment

Abstract

This article critically reflects upon the process of planning and executing a microteaching session undertaken as a unit of assessment on “Introduction to Learning, Teaching, and Assessment” (ILTA), the first module studied for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCap). Personal reflection and feedback from participants and the assessor for the microteaching session are used to assess the success of the session. The assessment utilised methodology suggested in Ivan Illich’s (1970) *Deschooling Society* and the article reflects upon the utility of Illich’s work in contemporary Higher Education. In *Deschooling Society* Illich suggests that education should fundamentally change so that “convivial” skills are taught, rather than subjects. The assessment attempted to teach a skill rather than an academic subject. The incongruence of attempting to pass an assessment using methods suggested by a theorist fundamentally opposed to the notion of academic assessment did affect the delivery of the session. However, it is possible to use some methods suggested by Illich. The use of an expert in co-delivery of the session, appearing via online video, was a success. The utilisation of full, one-to-one participation was also a success and the session demonstrated that these methods can be utilised in good teaching practice.

Key Words

Assessment, Illich, Critical Reflection, Teaching Skills

Introduction

This article examines, via personal reflection, the process of undertaking a microteaching assessment on “Introduction to Learning, Teaching, and Assessment” (ILTA), the first module studied for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PgCap). The microteaching session described took place at a university in the North West of England on 18 March 2015. It formed half of the assessment for the ILTA component of the PgCap. The aim of this unit is to teach core skills and competences utilised by teachers in Higher Education (HE) and to develop good practices in the delivery of lectures, seminars, and workshops. It teaches some of the prominent ideas and theories involved in planning and executing effective sessions in HE and is intended to be an introduction to the techniques

used by experienced teachers. The microteaching session is intended to test the extent to which students on the course are able to apply the techniques and theories learned in a practical teaching scenario.

The rubric of the assessment required each student on the course to select an educational theory and teach an interactive session based upon recommendations made by key researchers within that theory. There are two connected aims behind this; the first is that the person teaching the assessment learns about a topic through planning and teaching a session on it, and the second is that the other participants on the course learn about that topic through the taught session. Of the available topics, I selected “Deschooling Society” as I was somewhat familiar with Ivan Illich’s (1970) work but wanted to learn more about it, and discover if there was any potential to apply Illich’s theories and methods to my own teaching. Students had to submit a plan for the session one week before it took place, which was also part of the assessment. This was to be a maximum of 1200 words in length and needed to contain detail about learning outcomes, the approach taken, facilities required, and demands made on students.

The session I taught was fifteen minutes in total, and was taught to a small peer group made up of other students on the course. It was assessed by a member of staff from the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at the university. Peer assessment was also carried out in order to give immediate feedback on the quality of teaching, but this did not form part of the grading process. Immediately after the assessment, I wrote a brief reflective piece discussing how successful it had been and whether it met the rubric. Brookfield (1995) suggests that there are four “lenses” that can be engaged in critical reflection; these are: (1) the autobiographical, (2) the students' eyes, (3) our colleagues' experiences, and (4) theoretical literature. Of these four, three were utilised immediately after the microteaching session took place. Self-reflection, Brookfield suggests, is the key to discovering the value or “worth” of teaching, and therefore it is an essential part of teaching practice. This article aims to extend the process of self-reflection, engaging with critical literature. It is also directed towards informing future attempts at the microteaching element of ILTA.

The assessment was taught using methods inspired by Ivan Illich’s (1970) *Deschooling Society*, and this article will discuss the extent to which the microteaching session was successful both in terms of meeting the aims of the assessment and in utilising a number of methods proposed by Illich. It is an exploration of the possible application of “deschooled”

methods in higher education teaching, and a discussion of the ways that such methods can be used to alter existing teaching practices. My personal aim in taking the assessment using the methods described was to learn about new methods of teaching beyond my existing knowledge, and potentially discover new tools to utilise in my own practice.

I also had a wider, career-based aim, which was to pass the assessment. Buckland (2013) argues that in passing assessments and progressing through education, the “successful” student turns him/herself into a commodity with a “market value”. Whether this is the case or not, within the current education system there are very few alternatives to successfully passing assessments if a student wishes to make progress, both from an intellectual and a career standpoint. As will be explored throughout this article, there was a lack of congruence between some of Illich’s ideological aims and my personal aim to pass an assessment in an HE setting. This tension between the theory taught and the overall need to complete the assessment will be examined in detail in the discussion to follow.

Deschooling Society – Some Background Literature

In *Deschooling Society* (1970) Illich argues strongly against any and all institutionalised forms of education. This means not just state-organised education, but any learning that takes place in a formal environment with a curriculum that is not set by the individual. One of Illich’s (1970) key arguments is that education should be removed from institutions, as institutionalised education is one of the key ways in which political states maintain social control over citizens. In *Deschooling Society* Illich argues that institutions have become ends in themselves, and rather than meeting the needs of people who wish to be educated, they have become tools of the state.

As Kahn (2010, 39) suggests, ‘against the common sense defence of education as (at least potentially) a public good to be conserved, Illich counselled that people have always “known many things” without curricula’ and argued that formal education actually acts against the needs of learners. Kahn (2010, 42) provides a useful summary of Illich’s key ideological argument for “deschooling”, which is that ‘society’s hidden curriculum manufactures schools in order to introject forces of domination into student bodies’. This “hidden curriculum” is a vision of ‘techno-utopia’ inspired by the idea of continual societal progress, a vision that Illich strongly rejects. Illich argues that his vision of society is “Epimethean”; it rejects the idea of technological and societal progress if that progress is at the expense of “convivial” human interactions.

Illich suggests that education, including HE, currently serves the ideological purpose of producing a workforce with a strong belief in the idea of unending societal progress. A similar, although not identical, argument to Illich's is made by Gellner (2006) in *Nations and Nationalism*. Gellner's (2006, 36) model of national development runs thus:

‘Men acquire the skills and sensibilities which make them acceptable to their fellows, which fit them to assume places in society, and which make them “what they are”, by being handed over by their kin groups to an educational machine which alone is capable of providing the wide range of training required for the generic cultural base’.

In both conceptions of education, learning state-approved curricula in state-approved institutions provides the machinery for any political state to educate citizens not with what they need, but with what that state needs. Gellner's model is more geared towards explaining the reproduction of the modern phenomenon of nationally defined political states, but both models essentially argue that educational institutions are a tool of political elites.

Teaching, according to Illich's ideals, should take place in de-institutionalised spaces beyond any state influence in order to counteract any learned reaction that learners may have to institutionalised spaces. An important element of Illich's argument is that the current environment in which most education takes place teaches passivity to the aims and needs of the state. The main difference between Illich's ideas regarding active learning (although he does not call it that) and more “mainstream” ideas is that Illich does not ideologically value the aims of many educational courses.

Additionally, in *Deschooling Society* Illich proposes that the practice of teaching should be radically altered so that skills, not academic subjects, are taught. He also argues that the role of professional educator should be altered to that of facilitator, so that skills are taught by experts and professional educators primarily administer courses of learning rather than teaching them. Education professionals could potentially audit experts, but not teach. This is linked to Illich's argument that learning academic subjects is less valuable and worthwhile than the learning of useful skills. One particularly significant issue with this idea, however, is that the skills that can be termed “useful” are not listed with any clarity by Illich.

In Illich's view, skills should be “convivial”. Illich distinguishes between “convivial” tools and skills and ones which are not, but as McConnell (1972) points out, Illich's notion of

“conviviality” is based on a value judgement. He provides no list of the skills that are considered “convivial” and indeed, this category is highly subjective and individual. If learners are to truly decide their own path through education as Illich also recommends, then decisions on “conviviality” are surely theirs to make. The only way for students to decide what they consider to be convivial is through access to different tools and skills. Ultimately, the decision on what “conviviality” truly means is personal. The notion of “conviviality” that underpins Illich’s ideas is highly subjective.

Outside Illich’s work itself, there are limited resources for the scholar interested in the ideas set out in *Deschooling Society*. The majority of available resources were published in the early 1970s (examples include McConnell’s 1972 article “Ivan Illich’s Assault on Education” and Lister’s 1974 *Deschooling: A Reader*) but there has been relatively little published since the initial burst of interest that followed the publication of *Deschooling Society*. The relatively recent (2010) founding of *The International Journal of Illich Studies* may eventually lead to a greater volume of rigorous academic publication on Illich’s work, but at present the journal is not regularly published and partly as a result, it appears to have had limited impact beyond its few contributors.

The methods that teachers might employ in “deschooled” education are rarely discussed, and the efficacy of “deschooled” teaching methods is seldom investigated. There is currently very little for the scholar who wishes to know how Illich’s methods can be employed practically, and what effect the application of these methods has had in measurable terms. Before undertaking the microteaching assessment, I was unable to find any detailed description or discussion of the application of “deschooled” methods in a formal assessment, or indeed in any contemporary higher education teaching scenario.

In writing this article, I hope to prompt some discussion of how deschooling might be approached in an HE setting, and to share my own experiences of planning, executing, and reflecting upon an ILTA microteaching session. With any relatively avant garde educational endeavour there is always the possibility that other scholars may find the methods used and the conclusions made to be flawed. Even if this is the case, this article will at least provide some context for other and potentially more successful attempts at “deschooling” teaching in HE. There is only one contemporary example of using “deschooled” methods in this article, but this is still one more than is presently available.

It is also the case that many other articles in this area are heavily influenced by their origin in the United States. Some of the policies mentioned and educational contexts discussed lack relevance to a wider audience. Shouse's (2013) 'Deschooling Twenty-First Century Education' is a prime example of this. It contains detailed discussion of debates and issues within American education, including the Coleman Report (1966, also known as the Equality of Educational Opportunity Report), the Common Core State Standards Initiative which attempts to standardise levels of knowledge held by pupils at the end of each grade (Porter et al 2011), and No Child Left Behind (2001, implemented in 2002). This particular legislation requires states to test pupils in English and Mathematics from grades 3 to 8, and again in high school (Murnane and Papay, 2010). However, many of the policies and controversies discussed have little obvious relevance to an audience outside the United States and no attempt is made to relate them to European, Asian, or African experiences.

Earlier publications are also guilty of largely ignoring non-American experiences. McConnell (1972) presents two main types of educational experience – American, and “Third World”. While existing publications are primarily of use to an American audience, a discussion of the application of Illich's work in a British educational context adds something to existing knowledge and widens the range of discussion on Illich. It is to be hoped that the relatively universal experience of undertaking and understanding assessments is of commensurate universal interest, although the particular course discussed is only undertaken within the United Kingdom.

To summarise, Illich argues that institutions across the current educational system should be abolished. He also argues that teaching as a profession should be radically altered, and people should learn useful and convivial skills from networks of experts, setting their own curriculum rather than following one set by the state or by educational administrators. Which skills might be termed “useful” or “convivial” seems largely to be matter of personal opinion. It is fair to say, however that in essence, *Deschooling Society* is an argument against fixed educational criteria and indeed the very type of assessment that I was trying to pass. An evaluation of the success (or otherwise) of my attempt to use “deschooled” methods will follow, in order to examine the possible application of my experience to other scenarios.

Planning the Session

The arguments made in *Deschooling Society* are at odds with the overwhelming majority of contemporary texts in educational theory. Importantly for this particular article, they are also

at odds with the rubric of the assessment described, which demanded that the microteaching session be taught by the person primarily being assessed. This made taking the role of facilitator difficult, because it would be difficult for peers and the assessor for the course to assess my role in the session if I did not actually teach it myself. The rubric also required that the session should take 15 minutes in total. This ruled out moving the session outside the institution due to the amount of time this would take.

The assessment would be compromised critically if the group being taught were taken out of the institution because the nearest non-institutional space is at least five minutes away, and another student had to take their assessment immediately after the session. To summarise, two of the main methodological recommendations made by Illich could not be met if I was to pass the assessment; teaching outside the institution, and facilitating rather than teaching the session. This caused problems for me in terms of completely replicating Illich's proposed methods. I had to maximise the elements of Illich's ideas that could be met without jeopardising my chances of teaching a session that met the rubric.

Illich strongly stresses the importance of learning useful skills. It quickly became clear, given the rubric of the assessment, that the only way to "deschool" the assessment in any meaningful sense would be to teach a skill for at least part of the session. Having spent much of my life in formal education either as a student or a teacher, my own skill set is largely centred around academic practices. In order to meet at least one of Illich's ideals for "deschooled" teaching, I had to use the best non-academic skill that I possess. I am a good cricketer, having played at club level since I was twelve years old, and I wrote a session plan that allowed me to utilise this ability. Teaching a basic cricket skill used my skills and allowed me to make the session interactive, one of the key criteria within the rubric of the assessment.

In line with the aim of the module to introduce lecturers to relevant research in education, the assessment called for acknowledgment of contemporary pedagogical theory. Despite their radical nature and rejection of academic criteria, not all of Illich's ideas are at odds with contemporary pedagogy. The idea that learners should develop skills largely by doing them is similar to Kumpulainen and Wray's (2002, 18) argument that 'active participation and assistance provided by other members of the learning community' is vital in innovative peer group teaching. Similarly, Race's (2010, 166) suggestion that small group teaching should give participants 'opportunity for learning by doing' is compatible with Illich's ideas about

the way that learning should ideally be carried out. There was at least some scope for using contemporary methods and ideas whilst also teaching elements of a “deschooled” session, even if the ideal scenario and methodology could not be achieved.

Research revealed that there is some methodological crossover between “deschooled” teaching and contemporary pedagogical theory on the importance of active learning. Ideologically, “deschooling” may be outside the norms of most pedagogical theory, but some of the actual methods suggested in *Deschooling Society* are not incompatible with active learning in Higher Education. Students on practical courses (in art, technology, or computing to name but three) learn skills throughout their degrees, and these are linked to theories and assessment. Methodologically, there are elements of *Deschooling Society* that have been familiar to students and teachers in Higher Education for generations. There seems to be some incongruence between the ideological aims of *Deschooling Society* and the methods suggested within the text. The main difference, however, is that in Illich’s ideal for education, the skills taught are not assessed according to traditional educational criteria, unlike the assessment I took.

Illich calls for the use of experts in teaching skills. I was not able to bring in an expert to teach the whole session, and asking a professional to assist for four minutes of a short session was not a realistic solution (principally due to the costs involved). I decided to utilise the technology available to me and brought in an expert via the use of a Youtube video. I felt it was acceptable to use a video of an expert teaching a skill. It is not perfectly true to the methods discussed in *Deschooling Society* but I feel it is true to its spirit and to Illich’s discussion of the use of “convivial tools” in learning. As Kahn (2010, 44) discusses, ‘by definition, Illich’s “tools for conviviality” promote learning, sociality, community, autonomous and creative intercourse among persons’. I felt that I was using the video in a spirit of creativity, and not presenting technology as an end in itself but a means to learning. This is of course a judgement call.

I used a video of a cricketer widely acknowledged as one of the greatest of all time, Shane Warne, teaching the basics of spin bowling (this can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kfZgFi9Q9gc>). In the video, Warne teaches viewers how to bowl a leg break, plus a top spinner, a flipper, and a googly (these terms may be confusing to some elements of an international readership. I apologise for this but point those without some knowledge of cricket to the video I used, as it is very instructive with regard to context

and application of the terms used). Of these deliveries, only the top spinner can be realistically learned in a short time span, without coaching sessions and a detailed knowledge of cricket. I decided to focus upon teaching this delivery in my session. It is easy for a beginner to impart, has an obvious effect on the ball, and is therefore measurable. This was important from the point of view of assessing whether the skill had been learned, and whether it is therefore possible for me personally to teach using Illich's methods. I possess skills that are more challenging to learn than spinning a cricket ball, and that have a wider application to real life scenarios. However, I do not possess any other skills that can be taught in fifteen minutes.

The final elements of the session needed to summarise what happened, reinforce the theory taught, and link it to the key aims of the assessment. I therefore concluded with a summary taught in an informal yet more "classical" style familiar to students from formal education. This meant that there was an element of my session that was not in any way "deschooled", but this was essential if I was to pass the assessment. Without explaining what I had done and why I had done it, there was little chance of students having any understanding of what the session was about in wider educational terms, beyond learning a basic cricket skill.

The course strongly stresses the importance of writing achievable learning outcomes for each teaching session. I had to write two learning outcomes based on Illich's theories and include these in the submitted plan. The idea that a deschooled session might meet academic aims seems incongruous, but nevertheless it was essential for me to write outcomes with reference to academic practice. The first outcome I decided upon was for the group to be given the tools to understand the basic elements of deschooling in practical terms. This would at least mean that Illich's ideas could be spread by others, should they wish to. The second was for them to be able to demonstrate the practical skill taught and understand the theory behind it. This was measurable, which was essential for me to have some sense of whether the session had been a success. The extent to which these two outcomes were met will now be discussed.

Executing the Session

The session began with a brief introduction of the practical element to follow, to provide some context for what participants would be asked to do. This involved some brief detail on Ivan Illich's preferred methods for teaching, as discussed in the section earlier in this article. The participants then watched the Youtube video of Shane Warne, which I provided additional commentary for in order to make the most salient points regarding technique clear.

The peer feedback received on the use of Shane Warne said it was a 'great' addition to the session (anonymous peer feedback). Participants were able to understand why the video had been used, and what the aims of it were. There is of course nothing particularly groundbreaking about the use of a video clip in a contemporary educational environment, but to the best of my knowledge, using a video expert as a co-teacher is a relatively rare approach.

Following the video, I reinforced the advice given, showing that it is possible and indeed quite easy to replicate the top spin effect described in the video. There were two practical limitations to what I could easily do in the classroom. The first was that the room was only 13 yards in length. A standard cricket wicket is 22 yards long. In cricket, the ball will be delivered to the batsman overarm and for the particular type of delivery being learned, at a pace between 40 and 60 mph. This was not possible in the classroom because the ball would hit the back wall before the spin applied could take effect. I instead got participants to spin the ball in front of them. If top spin is applied to a ball correctly, and the ball is spun directly in front of the individual, it will spin back towards them, clearly demonstrating the effect of the action carried out.

The second issue was that the room had a floor to ceiling plate glass window. A full size cricket ball weighs five and a half ounces and can easily break even a reinforced window. The practical session was carried out away from the window but a stray bounce could have caused me a considerable financial penalty. I decided to use tennis balls instead of cricket balls for the practical session. The effect of top spin on a tennis ball is still clear and although the ball has a less obvious axis of rotation, it was sensible to use a smaller, lighter ball from a practical point of view. Beginners can also find cricket balls intimidating due to their weight and hardness; there are few such issues with tennis balls. This maximised the inclusivity of the session because there was little chance of anyone feeling intimidated or fearing injury.

Following the practical element of the session, every participant was able to get a ball to bounce back towards them by imparting spin using their fingers and wrist. This section was successful from a practical point of view and in terms of the application of pedagogical theory. Feedback indicated that introducing a practical demonstration was a good idea and this section was well received by all the participants. Learning a skill in the context of an academic session was something that all participants were open to and were able to achieve successfully.

Discussion and Evaluation

Teaching a deschooled session while still meeting the rubric of an academic assessment is a difficult task. Illich's ideas certainly do not provide the best fitted concept for planning and executing a fifteen minute microteaching session. The concept of undertaking a teaching assessment to prove teaching ability in HE is diametrically opposed to the main concept discussed in *Deschooling Society*. However, despite the difficulties involved in using "deschooled" methods in formal educational settings, it is possible to evaluate the session as a success in terms of teaching a number of concepts discussed by Illich. Everyone in the group was able to participate within and understand the session, and the peer feedback made it clear that everyone enjoyed what was a fresh approach for all of the participants.

The main aim of the participatory element of the session was to make it "deschooled"; it moved away from the relatively formal discussion of pedagogical theory and demonstrated how it might work in practice. The session was described as a 'good practical explanation' of deschooling, and also as 'fun and enjoyable' (anonymous peer feedback). The principal elements that were "deschooled" were the use of an expert (albeit via video) and the section that taught a skill, rather than an academic subject. Both of these were successful – the use of an expert helped participants to understand the task, and they were all able to learn the skill successfully. In terms of the idea that deschooled sessions should teach skills, the session has to be considered a success.

One participant felt that the skill learned required 'too many technical terms to be easily understood', and it can be suggested that the session was not "convivial" for this participant because cricket is a very technical sport (anonymous peer feedback). The other participants did not express this viewpoint however. I was praised for the amount of eye contact I made with participant whilst teaching the skill, and for having planned the session so that I was able to 'concentrate on each individual equally' (anonymous peer feedback). In terms of the planning and execution of the session, participants generally agreed that they had learned a skill and also learned some of the principles behind deschooling.

The assessor for the course gave feedback after the session, and felt that 'it was really challenging to demonstrate the approach taken'. Feedback from the assessor stated that 'the use of a video expert was a useful adjunct', but also suggested that 'more time could have been taken' to introduce the video. This may have been the case in a longer session, but in the context of a fifteen minute session, my view immediately after the session and now after a longer period of reflection is that there was not time for any further introductory comments.

The assessor noted that the session was ‘ambitious’ but also stated that ‘the session was a really interesting idea that perhaps did not integrate as well as it could have due to the context and limits of the assessment scenario’.

Ultimately, while participants felt they had learned a skill and learned the basic theory behind *Deschooling Society*, the need to relate the attainment of skills to academic criteria was problematic. The session was not entirely “deschooled” as even if I had been able to secure more time and take the session outside of an educational institution, there was still a need to meet the rubric of the assessment. If I had decided to plan a fully deschooled microteaching session, leaving the institution and facilitating the session rather than teaching it myself, I would not have passed the assessment. Unsurprisingly, therefore, formal academic assessment and fully “deschooled” teaching are not well matched to each other. Ultimately, it does not seem possible to teach a fully “deschooled” session whilst also attempting to pass an assessment that uses fixed academic criteria. This is perhaps an unsurprising conclusion.

While it is somewhat difficult to extrapolate out and make generalisations about short sessions, it is clear that the session worked in terms of teaching a skill. It also worked in terms of linking the skill to a concept within the study of educational theory. Some of the methods used within the session were also considered successful by participants and the assessor. Participation within small group teaching is often recommended (by Race, 2010 amongst others) and what the session reinforces is the positive impact that participation can have within small group teaching scenarios.

The session also showed that it is useful to teach a theory by demonstrating one of its practical applications. This provides support to the idea that ‘learning by doing’ (Race, 2010, 166) can be a useful teaching methodology in Higher Education. The other element praised both by the assessor and the participants, and that I also felt was successful at the time, was the use of an expert via the YouTube video. This is a method that I will certainly use again in teaching other sessions because the success I had integrating the video used in this session, suggests that this is a method that students respond strongly to. There is wide availability of useful online material, including talks and demonstrations of skills, and this appears to be a method that can be successfully utilised in other sessions.

Conclusions

It is certainly possible to use elements of Illich's proposed "deschooled" methods when teaching within Higher Education. Participants in the session I taught were willing and able to learn a new skill. The use of an expert in that skill was a good addition to the session, and the plethora of teaching resources available online makes this something that is easy to adopt and has a potentially high yield in terms of teaching not just skills, but ideas and philosophies. Teaching skills is something that can be easily achieved providing the practitioner has enough basic ability to do so, or is allowed by their institution to bring in an expert to pass ideas on.

It is also possible to use "deschooled" methods in a teaching assessment and still achieve a passing grade. The session was awarded a mark of 60 and praised for its originality and innovative content. Those taking assessments of this type in the future may be encouraged by this, and could consider trying something different to standard lecturing formats. One thing that is clear, however, is that within the rubric of academic assessments in teaching, attempting a purely deschooled approach is a likely path to failure. It was clear that attempting to use an expert in order to take the role of facilitator was not an acceptable approach. Teaching skills without reference to educational theory was also not acceptable in this case. Deschooled methods can be used, but only within the context of academic subjects. Teaching skills outright without reference to academic attainment is not an approach that can be taken within higher education assessments.

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