Deschooling (and) the Writing Center[1]

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Writing center praxis can be enriched by noting the affinities between peer tutoring and "deschooling," a concept first articulated by social critic Ivan Illich in 1970.[2] While Illich did not seek to banish schools, he did critique them in an effort to open up other possibilities for education beyond formal, top-down schooling. Ivan Illich's proposals for alternative educational arrangements, such as peer matching and skill acquisition, resemble writing center spaces and the work of peer tutoring. Connecting deschooling with writing center scholarship, I describe how peer tutoring resonates with Illich's vision for what education might look like in a deschooled society:

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convivial, user-initiated learning that resists the competitive, commodified logics of traditional schools. According to Illich, schooling turns knowledge into a commodity, measured through grades and diplomas, and the social capital that degrees confer leads learners to view classroom learning as superior to interactions and experiences that happen outside of classroom spaces, such as voluntary learning with peers.

To illustrate the connections between Illich's ideas and writing center tutoring, I draw on qualitative research conducted at the Great Lakes State University Writing Center (GLSU-WC), a writing center at a large, urban university with high levels of racial, economic, and linguistic diversity. The daily work of GLSU tutors demonstrates connections between writing center tutoring and Illich's deschooling vision. I also describe how Illichean approaches can help writing centers empower writers and tutors by challenging traditional educational beliefs and practices.

DESCHOOLING AND RADICAL WRITING CENTER SCHOLARSHIP

Writing center scholars have long described their work as radically out of step with the mainstream ideologies and practices of higher education. Lil Brannon and Stephen North claim that writing centers offer "a different model of teaching and learning" (7) that exists on the metaphorical "margins" of English studies and higher education writ large, and they argue that such marginality offers generative possibilities. Neal Lerner argues the transgressive nature of writing center work is based on decades of resistance to standard classroom pedagogies. Likewise, Andrea Lunsford suggests that tutors and directors constitute "a subversive group" that "pose a threat as well as a challenge to the status quo of higher education" (9). In short, scholars of writing centers—and composition more broadly—have a long history of critiquing mainstream educational practices and advocating for critical pedagogies. Such arguments can also be seen in the works of educational critics such as Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich, but these connections have not been explored frequently in writing center scholarship.

More recently, an exception has been Anne Geller et al. Their analysis of everyday aspects of writing center work links peer tutoring with deschooling but mentions deschooling only in passing

(9, 70-71), leaving readers with only a vague understanding of Illich's ideas and how they might relate to writing centers. Seeking to extend the work of Geller et al., I see affinities between deschooling and writing centers. Moreover, I see the beliefs and practices of GLSU-WC peer tutors as connected with Illich's deschooling claims. Understanding and appreciating deschooling could impact how we train tutors to navigate the tensions between traditional schooling and peer tutoring.

LEARNING THROUGH CONVIVIAL ALTERNATIVES

In *Deschooling Society*, Illich questions formal educational structures and practices while offering suggestions for alternative educational arrangements. Beyond his critiques, he also seeks "to show that the inverse of school is possible: that we can depend on self-motivated learning instead of employing teachers to bribe or compel the student to find time and the will to learn; that we can provide the learner with new links to the world instead of continuing to funnel all educational programs through the teacher" (73). Illich views informal, user-initiated "educational networks" as preferable to most forms of schooling. This alternative to schooling follows what Illich describes as a "convivial" tool or model of design that is reminiscent of writing center praxis. Conviviality[3] is an essential concept for comprehending Illich's vision of deschooling society and for understanding the potential connections between deschooling and writing centers. For Illich, conviviality is a positive alternative to the problems of modern institutions. Conviviality is central to Illich's insistence that "educational networks" —also referred to as "learning webs"— are preferable to schooling. While this idea entails diverse possibilities, Illich proposes four specific examples (see fig. 1). These arrangements present a learning landscape that is generally user-initiated rather than compulsory, collaborative rather than competitive. Referring to these as "webs" and "networks," Illich highlights the fluid, ecological nature of his approach to learning as opposed to the traditionally top-down, teacher and curriculum-driven approach to education structures.
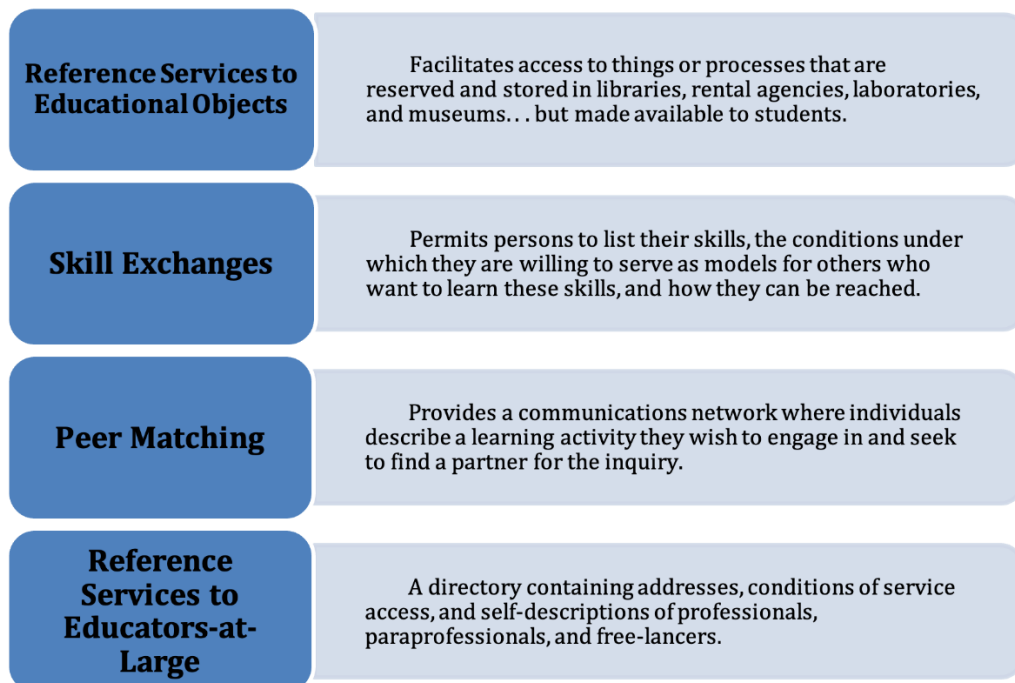
Reference Services to Educational Objects	Facilitates access to things or processes that are reserved and stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories, and museums... but made available to students.
Skill Exchanges	Permits persons to list their skills, the conditions under which they are willing to serve as models for others who want to learn these skills, and how they can be reached.
Peer Matching	Provides a communications network where individuals describe a learning activity they wish to engage in and seek to find a partner for the inquiry.
Reference Services to Educators-at-Large	A directory containing addresses, conditions of service access, and self-descriptions of professionals, paraprofessionals, and free-lancers.

Fig. 1. Learning webs as proposed by Ivan Illich (*Deschooling* 78-79).

Illich suggests that his ideas of convivial learning webs would contribute to a deschooled society by inverting educational structures into convivial opportunities for all learners. Although Illich's books were once widely read and discussed, his call for radically rethinking institutions was never seriously considered, and today his ideas are largely unknown. Nevertheless, my experiences suggest that deschooling can be understood in the everyday work of peer tutors. I've found that tutors who have never heard of Illich seem to enact pedagogies that parallel Illich's proposed learning webs.

DISCOVERING PEER TUTORING AS CONVIVIAL LEARNING

I conducted a 15-month case study of learning in the GLSU-WC from fall 2017 to fall 2018. As part of a large, diverse, R-1 public university in the urban Midwest, the GLSU-WC has been operating for four decades. This stand-alone center, funded by the Department of English and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, offers peer tutoring services to all students or community members. My central questions were: (a) How does learning occur at the GLSU-WC? and (b) How do various participants understand the learning that takes place at the GLSU-WC?

My study employed ethnographic methods of data collection including participant observation, interviewing, and document collection for observing and analyzing participant's beliefs and practices. Participants were drawn from three specific categories: current and former GLSU-WC directors (n = 7), current GLSU-WC tutors (n = 33), and novices who were students in the tutor training course during their first semester in the GLSU-WC (n = 6). Through open-ended individual and focus-group interviews with participants, I conversed with a wide range of individuals connected to the GLSU-WC for a total of approximately 18 hours. These data were triangulated with around 70 hours in the GLSU-WC as a participant-observer sitting in on tutoring sessions, staff meetings, and the tutor training course. Weekly field notes and interview transcripts were coded, organized by theme, and analyzed further.

Overall, I found that participants described this learning space in ways surprisingly consistent with Illich's conceptualization of conviviality and learning webs. In terms of how learning occurs at the GLSU-WC, my results suggest that literacy learning via peer tutoring pedagogies can be understood as tacitly enacting a model akin to those described in *Deschooling Society*. I view GLSU-WC's tutoring pedagogy as combining four specific nodes of Illichean learning webs (see fig. 2). As a participant-observer in the GLSU-WC, I repeatedly noted the importance tutors placed on facilitating participation over correctness. Tutors sought conviviality with writers, an atypical pedagogical approach learned through their tutor training courses. The GLSU tutoring handbook crafted by past and present directors states the following goals for tutoring: "In addition to helping with writing and building partnerships with writers, the tutor has the responsibility of creating opportunities for the writer to participate" (Aleksa et al. 5). Tutors typically begin sessions by setting the agenda *with* the writer rather than approaching writers through a deficit lens and presuming that they know how to diagnose and fix "bad" writing.
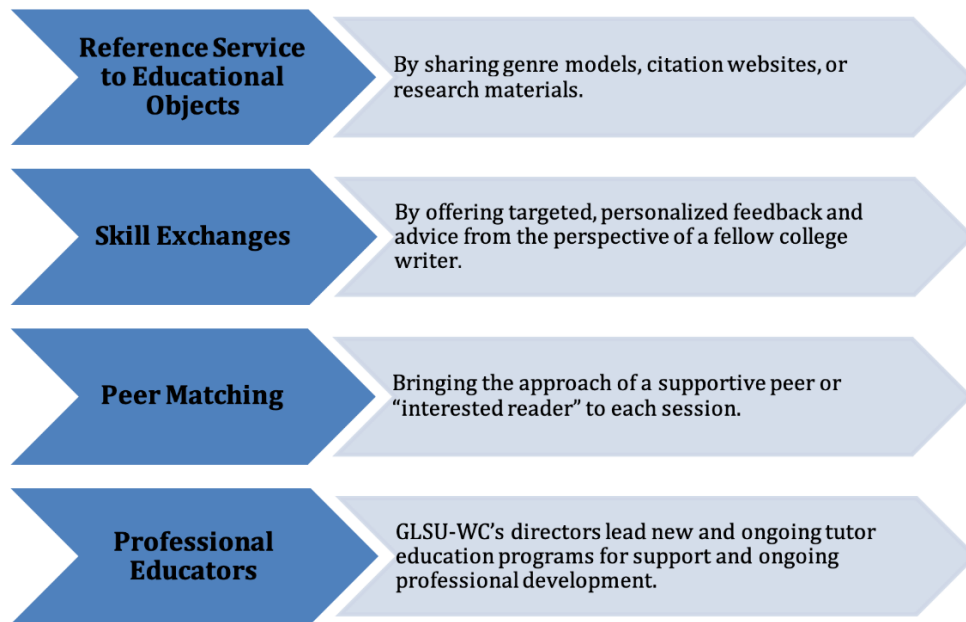
Reference Service to Educational Objects	By sharing genre models, citation websites, or research materials.
Skill Exchanges	By offering targeted, personalized feedback and advice from the perspective of a fellow college writer.
Peer Matching	Bringing the approach of a supportive peer or "interested reader" to each session.
Professional Educators	GLSU-WC's directors lead new and ongoing tutor education programs for support and ongoing professional development.

Fig. 2. Learning webs as seen in the GLSU-WC.

While the start of a tutoring session resembles a pair of college students casually chatting, this is intentional. Tutors report that this move helps them to learn about the writer's needs while simultaneously reducing the anxiety of meeting with a stranger for writing help. When tutors arrive at the table to begin a session, they develop rapport with writers by introducing themselves and then eventually ask: "So, what should we work on today?" Tutoring doesn't begin with the schooling approach, which asks, "What should someone learn?"; tutors instead enact something more akin to deschooling by asking, "What kinds of things and people might learners want to be in contact with in order to learn?" (Illich *Deschooling* 78). Peer tutors do not teach, grade, or implement a curriculum; rather, they offer fellow students what writers need, namely an interlocutor who can respond to their writing during the writing process, one who is familiar with different rhetorical expectations and academic genres of GLSU's myriad discourse communities.

The GLSU-WC aligns with Illich's definition of a "convivial" learning space. For Illich, conviviality is a positive alternative for inverting the problems of institutions that adhere to capitalist logics. Conviviality is at the heart of Illich's proposal that "learning webs" or "educational networks" should take the place of formal schooling arrangements: he describes examples such as skill-sharing, peer matching, and access to educational resources and professional educators on an ad hoc basis. The WC blends these networks: writers select or are matched with peer tutors who bring a skill set of writing and pedagogy and who help connect writers with various digital educational resources, such as finding samples of particular genres, navigating research via the GLSU library, and integrating sources with the help of Purdue OWL, while also having directors on hand to help solve other problems that tutors or writers encounter. The GLSU-WC operates without formal teachers, grades, or a curriculum, and yet my observations and conversations with tutors demonstrate the tremendous amount of experiential literacy learning that occurs for peer tutors. During a focus group interview, Flora, a GLSU tutor and a health studies major, excitedly explained this to me. She reported that tutors repeatedly experience the writing process by "seeing it firsthand . . . that writing and rewriting makes good writing!" Fellow tutors Bran, Claudia, and Amy agreed, each offering examples about how they developed experiential

knowledge through hours of conversation and textual analysis. The experiences of these participants suggest that through tutoring they came to better understand what Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle describe as the variable, complex, unique nature of the writing process (52).

Illich believes that "conviviality" is key to deschooling education between learners, and this idea is very useful for understanding the aims of peer tutoring. A similar concept can be found among the everyday work of GLSU-WC tutors—"peerness." According to the GLSU-WC tutor handbook, "what makes peer tutoring distinct from other educational methods is its emphasis on the tutor's responsibility to create 'peerness'—that is, respectful relationships with other students and opportunities for those students to participate in a conversation about their writing" (Aleksa et al. 4). My participants described this relational attribute of peerness in tutoring as akin to "hospitality," "professionalism," "respect," "empathy," and "camaraderie." The goal of peerness seems to be a fluid pedagogical orientation and process as opposed to a fixed final product or disposition, such as improved grades or corrected errors. Peerness also seems to encapsulate the commitment of GLSU staff to make the space an Illichean peer-matching endeavor, rather than a skill-sharing endeavor without the goal of "peerness."

Study results represent an insider view of GLSU-WC tutor pedagogies that contrast sharply with the outdated, stereotypical view of writing centers as a site of remediation. From such a perspective, one might assume that tutoring reinforces ideologies implicit in compulsory schooling. This tension speaks to the importance of GLSU's tutor training course. As the training materials and lead writing center administrators make clear, this course is meant to challenge novice tutors' ideas about writing, tutoring, and education; otherwise, the center's senior directors worry that tutors would inadvertently reproduce the hierarchical, oppressive school model that they've internalized through years of schooling.

DESCHOOLING (AND) WRITING CENTER WORK

Overall, I have made the case that writing centers such as GLSU's may operate in a similar logic to that of deschooling. The implications of this view are pertinent for writing center theorists and practitioners. Convivial tutoring pedagogies offer opportunities for teaching and learning simultaneously: writers gain insights about writing and rhetoric by receiving feedback while participating in their sessions, and tutors understand the composing process *in situ* while engaging with diverse disciplinary content and genres. Writing centers, therefore, can offer a sort of "deschooling" learning environment for students to acquire a deeper understanding of rhetoric and writing. Most importantly, centers can educate tutors and fellow colleagues about the ways in which writing centers themselves offer effective hands-on forms of rhetorical and pedagogical education. Face-to-face meetings with other students who have questions or need assistance on various projects seem to lead tutors to quickly read, listen, and adapt. Over time, tutors build a mental toolkit as they become increasingly familiar with the academic forms and expectations common to discourse communities across the university. Tutors learn "threshold concepts" of writing (Adler-Kassner and Wardle) as they develop social, rhetorical, and metacognitive understandings of writing through repeated tutoring encounters.

Peer tutoring offers a flexible, low-cost approach to literacy learning that can meet the diverse needs of writers in person or online, synchronously or asynchronously. Seen through the lens of Illich's deschooling thesis, writing center tutoring offers an alternative educational network for learning beyond traditional classroom spaces. In the end, there may be writing center practitioners who disagree with Illich's critiques of schooling—that is exactly how education

theorist Neil Postman felt when he first encountered Illich's work in the 1970s. Eventually, Postman suggests we take Illich's unsettling ideas seriously, and he identifies three specific questions that help educators to begin the process of "deschooling" to reform their own practices: "(1) Will the innovation make resources more widely available? (2) Will it tend to deemphasize the importance of teaching as against learning? (3) Will it tend to make students freer, and their learning less confined?" (146). By using these questions to audit our own educational practices, the implications of Illich's deschooling vision become clearer.

It is possible that many writing centers offer models of convivial learning arrangements that should be supported and studied as models of resilient educational adaptations that align with Illichean notions of how education can empower individuals and transform communities. While the idea of "deschooling" educational spaces may seem far-fetched, even contradictory, novice tutors can read excerpts of Illich's *Deschooling Society* alongside other pieces of critical pedagogy and then reflect on and discuss their own experiences of learning in and out of schools. If tutors and directors see resonance with deschooling concepts in their writing center—if they come to view learning as "unhampered participation in a meaningful setting" (39)—they may relate to writers and each other in more generative, convivial ways that reject the capitalist logics that continue to permeate modern educational practices.

NOTES

1. Sections of this manuscript were part of the author's unpublished 2020 doctoral dissertation: *Finding Ivan Illich in the Writing Center: A Case Study of Deschooling and Literacy Learning.*

2. It may seem contradictory that university writing centers exist within educational institutions while engaging in "deschooling" practices. This contradiction existed throughout Illich's own life. After earning a PhD in history, Illich served as an educational administrator in Puerto Rico, founded the educational Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) in central Mexico, and later worked as a lecturer at Penn State. For more, see Todd Hartch's The Prophet of Cuernavaca.

3. In his 1973 book *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich defines conviviality as "autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment," which he contrasts with "industrial productivity" (11). Conversations in the GLSU-WC can be considered "convivial" in that they are creative, dialogic interactions between individuals who are seeking to and improve a piece of writing collaboratively. Tutoring sessions aren't scripted, as tutors are trained to develop ideas generatively with writers rather than making changes or corrections for them.

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