

A LIBERTARIAN APPROACH TO TEACHING READING

BY

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THESIS

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Abstract

As schooling becomes increasingly regulated, we often hear complaints to the effect that if only students and teachers had fewer constraints and requirements, they would be free to learn and to teach. In this thesis, I revisit an educational movement that attempted to abolish all constraints on children and students: libertarian educational theory. I consider the strengths and weaknesses of the libertarian approaches to education that were voiced in the 1960s and '70s, focusing on the writings of three representative libertarian educators: A. S. Neill, John Holt, and Ivan Illich. I then reframe the question of children's freedom in a non-dichotomous way by proposing that we think of freedom as agency-within-structure. This modified conception of freedom helps us recognize that freedom is not the mere absence of constraints, and in fact certain constraints are actually necessary to promote freedom. I argue that requiring all children to learn to read is just such a constraint, because in our society it is a prerequisite for the possibility of self-directed education. At the same time, even if it is not possible for *all* areas of learning to be optional, we can still teach those that *are* required in a way that is consistent with the goals of libertarian education. I close by exploring practical principles for a libertarian pedagogy of reading.

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Introduction: Educational Freedom

This thesis is intended to challenge a common conception of educational freedom as the mere absence of constraints. Although we do not always use the word “freedom,” many of the protests against the increasing prevalence of rules, requirements, and regulations in educational policy imply that such regulations constrain the choices of teachers and students and so make them less free to educate and to be educated. Much of the discussion concerning regulation focuses on *teachers’* freedom to choose content and methods that they find meaningful and effective in their local contexts, rather than adhering to state-mandated curricula. But some educators, especially those in the homeschooling movement, also express concern for individual students’ freedom to learn whatever interests them and in whatever way best suits them.¹

In the mid-twentieth century, many educators proposed alternative educational approaches that made the freedom of children and other students *the* supreme value in education. In this thesis I focus on the writings of three such educators: A. S. Neill, the founder and longtime headmaster of Summerhill School in England; John Holt, a former fifth grade teacher who became the father of modern unschooling; and Ivan Illich, a lapsed Catholic priest who (together with Everett Reimer, Paulo Freire and others) was heavily involved in the influential Center for Intercultural Documentation at Cuernavaca, Mexico. The contexts in which they thought and wrote about education, and the alternative models they proposed, differed significantly from one another. But they were united in attempting to conduct education in a way that respects and

¹ To be sure, the logic of homeschooling muddies the waters considerably between parents’ rights to educate their children as they choose, free from state interference, and children’s rights to a decent education, whatever their parents’ means and desires. Yet most homeschooling families, no matter how traditional they may be in many matters, still demonstrate at least *some* commitment to individualized education and student-driven learning.

supports children's freedom. It is this common thread in their thought that I call "libertarian educational theory."

At this point several questions may come to mind. What exactly do I mean by "libertarian educational theory," and how does it relate to other approaches to education? Why do I use the term "libertarian" to describe this particular collection of thinkers and the theory of education they advocated? And is there value in resurrecting this educational theory half a century after it was most popular? I discuss each of these questions in turn.

What is libertarian educational theory?

I define libertarian educational theory as the theoretical attempt to maximize the scope of educational freedom afforded to children and other learners. Although this approach to education has been put into practice by the educators mentioned above, this thesis is concerned with the theoretical questions that such a strong commitment to children's freedom raises about the nature of education itself: Is a radically free education even possible, or does too much learner freedom contradict the very idea of education? And if it *is* possible to both give children freedom and educate them, what would such a libertarian education look like?

Libertarian educational theory must be distinguished from both liberal learning and progressive education, two other approaches to education that also claim to value the freedom of students. The tradition of liberal learning, exemplified today in liberal arts colleges, began with the *paideia* of the free young men of ancient Greece; throughout its long history, its advocates have argued that it is the training that one needs in order to be a truly free human, as opposed to the technical training that prepares a student only for one particular vocation. More recently, many progressive-minded educators have criticized the same traditional forms of education that libertarian educators do. Like libertarians, progressives try to avoid forcing children to learn adult-

chosen things or in adult-oriented ways; instead, they structure their educational programs in ways that encourage children to make choices about what and how they learn. So both liberal learning and progressive education have some reason for claiming to offer a freedom-oriented approach to education. But libertarian education differs from both of these in significant ways. Whereas proponents of liberal learning claim to educate *for* freedom, libertarian educators seek ways to educate *through* freedom. Progressive educators do so as well, but libertarians and progressives differ in the *extent* to which they value students' freedom: progressives consider it one educational value among several, while libertarians claim that freedom is the highest value to be considered when making educational decisions.

Why "libertarian"?

None of the educators I designate "libertarian" directly connected their own views on education to *political* libertarianism, nor do I make such a connection in this thesis. Moreover, the conservative connotations of political libertarianism in the contemporary United States could not be further from the positions of Neill, Holt, and Illich, insofar as they discussed political theory at all². Why, then, do I refer to these thinkers as "libertarian educators" rather than as freeschoolers, unschoolers, or deschoolers?

Partial justification for the term comes from its use in the title of Joel Spring's (1975) book *A Primer of Libertarian Education*. Spring's collection of educational theorists overlaps but does not correspond to my own: He makes no mention of John Holt (or indeed of homeschooling in general), and he gives as much space to William Godwin, Karl Marx, Wilhelm Reich, and Paulo Freire, as he does to Ivan Illich and A. S. Neill. His attention to this group of educational thinkers

² With respect to education, *political* libertarianism is more concerned with parents' and families' right to freedom from the state's control over the education of its citizens. At times parents' freedom and children's freedom align against the state, while at other times they are opposed to each other. In this thesis I focus on the freedom of individual children and learners.

stems from his focus “on the major radical educational ideas flowing from anarchism, Marxism, and the Freudian left” (Spring 1975: 10). My analysis of libertarian education is not nearly as leftist as Spring’s, yet his use of the term demonstrates that it has not always been as strongly associated with (political) conservatism as it presently is in this country.

Another reason I chose the term “libertarian” is that it highlights the common ground among the three thinkers who are my focus, whereas terms such as “freeschooler,” “unschooler,” and “deschooler” (typically applied to Neill, Holt, and Illich, respectively) emphasize their differences. To be sure, those differences are significant for my analysis in revealing the gaps in each thinker’s account of education and freedom and in illustrating the various approaches one might take to educational freedom. However, the true *topic* of my thesis is what Neill, Holt, and Illich share: an overarching concern for the freedom of children and other students. In particular, they each suggest (to varying degrees) that freedom and constraint are opposed to each other, that more constraint equals less freedom and vice versa. In their use of this “negative” conception of freedom (Berlin 1969: 121f), the libertarian educators do owe a debt to political libertarianism, even if an unacknowledged one.

Even if the views of Neill, Holt, and Illich deserve the name “libertarian educational theory,” one might still question whether the modification that I suggest in this thesis — reconceptualizing freedom in terms of agency-within-structure — can justifiably be called “libertarian.” Although I reject one distinctive of libertarian education, the opposition between freedom and constraint, I do so *because* I embrace and seek to develop another, the concern for personal action and student-controlled learning. For this reason, throughout much of the thesis I continue to use the term “libertarian education” to refer to the approach to that I advocate.

However, in the conclusion I propose an alternate name in order to more clearly communicate my intended meaning, without incurring political misunderstandings³.

Why now?

The libertarian educators were most active in writing *and* most widely read during the 1960s and '70s, a time of significant cultural interest in radically different ways of structuring both schooling and society. Attention to libertarian educational alternatives dropped off in the '80s, and has not revived since. Apart from a couple of articles in the early 2000s exploring the possibilities for applying Ivan Illich's ideas of deschooling to the increasingly effective Internet (Hart 2001, Whittington & McLean 2001), libertarian educational theory remains largely outside the cultural conversation about education and schooling. For this reason, one might wonder whether these educational ideas are still relevant, four to five decades after their heyday.

Further complicating the question of contemporary relevance is the fact that the subsequent history of all three writers' educational thought moved away from the positions they expressed in the 1960s and '70s. When John Holt first began to write and speak about educational issues, he advocated giving children more meaningful and intellectually engaging activities to do *within* the classroom, but he did not question the overall system of compulsory schooling. However, over time he came to believe that formal schooling itself was unnecessary for learning, and so encouraged parents to take their children out of schools and to educate them at home and in the community. In the 1980s, he was active in the legalization of homeschooling (see especially Holt 1976 and the website dedicated to Holt's work, <http://www.johnholtgws.com/>).

³ It is this name, "hopeful education," that I expect to use in further developing the thread of thought begun in this thesis. For an explanation of the very specific way in which I use the term 'hope,' derived from Illich, see the conclusion.

In the case of Ivan Illich, when the 1970s did not bring about the widespread social revolution he anticipated (see Illich 1970: 111), he turned his attention to more scholarly and less activist pursuits (Cayley 2005: 18ff). In the forward to Hern (1996), Illich states that his thinking on education shifted considerably both immediately after the publication of *Deschooling Society* and in the following decades:

I began to notice that educational rituals reflected, reinforced, and actually created belief in the value of learning pursued under conditions of scarcity. Such beliefs, arrangements, and rituals, I came to see, could easily survive and thrive under the rubrics of deschooling, free schooling, or homeschooling (which, for the most part, are limited to the commendable rejection of authoritarian methods). (Hern 1996: ix)

Unfortunately, this forward is only three pages long, and displays neither the careful conceptual analysis found in Illich (1970) nor an alternative proposal comparable to the “learning webs” of *Deschooling Society*. For a thoughtful attempt to understand Illich’s later views on schooling and education, including those contained in both the forward to Hern (1996) and the educational speeches contained in Illich (1992), see Bruno-Jofré and Zaldívar (2012).

Of the three libertarian educators I discuss, Neill was the most radically committed to children’s freedom. Although he died in 1973 (Matthias 1980), it seems unlikely that he would have wavered from his principles even had he lived to see the cultural changes of the 1980s and beyond. Summerhill, the boarding school in southern England that was his life’s project, continues to operate in the same way it did while he was headmaster: classes are offered but children are not required to attend them, and the entire community comes together once a week for a General Meeting in which each person has one vote (regardless of age or role). On the surface, Summerhill seems to remain unchanged since Neill’s death. However, the current headmistress (Zoe Neill Readhead, Neill’s daughter) says that she prefers to call the school a “children’s democracy” because the term “free school” had taken on unwanted meanings (Lee 2012). So here too, a

noticeable shift in thought has occurred since the publication of Neill's account of Summerhill (which I use in this thesis).

Given these changes, both within libertarian education itself and in society in general, why revisit the libertarian educational theory of the 1960s and '70s at all? In part, the very fact that these thinkers are no longer as widely read as they once were suggests that a reconsideration of their ideas is warranted. We did not set aside the writings of the libertarian educators because we had solved the complex question of educational freedom once and for all, but rather because other topics and concerns came to dominate the conversation about education. The libertarian educators still say something worth hearing — even if adopting their recommendations wholesale would be impossible or undesirable.

Two contemporary trends illustrate that freedom remains a pressing issue in education. The first is the increasing tendency of educational policy to mandate the particulars of curricula, methods, and assessments. Both proponents and opponents of educational regulation hold implicit beliefs about the relationship between students' freedom and constraint. Proponents must believe either that students' freedom is not significantly affected by the constraints of regulations, or that if regulations *do* restrict students' freedom, such restriction is justified by the other benefits of quality education, both to the individual and to society.⁴ In contrast, opponents must believe that the constraints imposed by regulations *do* harm students' freedom, and perhaps their ability to learn as well.⁵ These beliefs about freedom are rarely explicitly stated, yet they inform policy discussions on all sides. Accordingly, it is important to analyze them carefully. An appropriate

⁴ Proponents must also believe that regulation has a causal relationship with educational quality, an assumption the libertarian educators might encourage us to question.

⁵ Note that I am assuming both proponents and opponents of regulation have the best interests of students in mind. A less charitable assumption might suggest more sinister reasons in either case. For example, one might support regulation out of fear of young people's potential for deviant behavior, or oppose it out of disinterest in ensuring that *all* children receive a quality education.

place to begin is with a re-examination of both the strengths and the shortcomings of those thinkers who most strongly advocated for students' freedom.

A second, and related, trend also indicates that freedom and choice remain as relevant to educational considerations as ever: the growing number of parents and students who are choosing homeschooling, unschooling, flexischooling, or other alternatives to full-time, classroom-based formal education⁶. Of course, none of these educational movements is homogeneous; there are as many different reasons for choosing homeschooling as there are families who do so. Some of those reasons, and some homeschooling methods, are the *opposite* of what the libertarian educators advocated. However, other strands of homeschooling seem to be in accordance with the visions of Holt and Illich⁷, especially insofar as homeschoolers emphasize the importance of learning that is tailored to and even chosen by the individual student. Therefore, the increasing prevalence of homeschooling and related educational alternatives, and the related tensions between adult authority and child freedom, justify re-examining, clarifying, and critiquing the ideas and principles of libertarian education.

In addition to the current trends of increasing regulation and homeschooling, there is yet another reason why I believe this thesis is worthwhile. Few if any of the responses to Neill, Holt,

⁶ The National Center for Education Statistics (2001, Table 1; 2013, Table 206.10) demonstrates steady growth in the number and percentage of students aged 5 through 17 that are educated at home: 850,000 (1.7 percent) in 1999, 1,096,000 (2.3 percent) in 2003, 1,520,000 (3.0 percent) in 2007, and 1,773,000 (3.4 percent) in 2012. Of course, these numbers are estimates of a population that by its very nature renders data collection unusually difficult. Moreover, simple data like this cannot indicate the prevalence of students enrolled part-time (usually two-three days a week) in homeschool co-ops, charter schools, and traditional public schools, students enrolled in public or private schools some years and homeschooled other years, and other flexible uses of traditional and alternative education. Nevertheless, the widely acknowledged growth in homeschooling etc., both in absolute terms and as a percentage of total school-aged children, is sufficient to demonstrate the increasing desire for alternatives to traditional education.

⁷ Neill held that children can only have freedom within the community made possible by a boarding school setting.

and Illich published in the past half-century exhibit the stance of sympathetic, forward-looking critique that I take in this thesis. Some writers uncritically accept the libertarian educators' conception of educational freedom (e.g. Ayers 2003). Others critique that conception yet clearly do not value students' freedom as highly as the libertarian educators do (e.g. Barrett 1981, Darling 1984). And still others try to apply a few isolated ideas without genuinely wrestling with the libertarian educators' overall critique of institutionalized education (e.g. Hart 2001, Whittington & McLean 2001). (For a collection of essays fitting into each of these categories, including John Holt's response to the work of A. S. Neill, see Hart 1970.) The few works of scholarship on the libertarian educators that are *both* sympathetic *and* critical are generally backwards-looking, interested in clarifying the libertarian educators' thought rather than exploring how it might be applied to contemporary educational contexts (e.g. Hemmings 1973, Cayley 2005, Bruno-Jofré & Zaldivar 2012). In this thesis I attempt to discuss libertarian educational theory in a way that is critical yet sympathetic, and above all forward-looking. To be sympathetic toward what you critique, and to be critical of what you admire and seek to emulate, are not easy tasks. For this reason, I consider the intellectual challenge to be worthwhile in its own right. Although I ultimately reject some of the educational principles advocated by the libertarian educators, I do so in order to more fully accommodate *other* principles they *also* held dear. My goal in this thesis is to move forward toward a *modified* version of libertarian education, one that — I hope — Neill, Holt, and Illich would recognize in spirit, if not in letter.

Further preliminary considerations

In addition to the clarifications and justifications above, I must also bracket two important issues that are undoubtedly related to the topic of educational freedom, but which I cannot adequately treat in this thesis. I set aside other matters as I reach them (particularly in the sections about

learning to read), but mention these at the outset in order to ward off misunderstandings of my goal in this particular intellectual project.

The first is *morality*. Any theory that places a high value on individual choice runs up against the difficulty of distinguishing between right and wrong uses of freedom (the latter often called *abuses* of freedom or ‘license’). Neill in particular has been much criticized for inconsistently applying the distinction between freedom and license (see Hart 1970 and Barrett 1981). The fact that I remain mostly silent regarding the many possible ways of misusing one’s freedom, intentionally or unintentionally, should not be taken to mean that I think morality is of no concern for either freedom or education. On the contrary, some vision of the good life or human flourishing necessarily lies behind every theory of both concepts. And I am well aware of the possibility that my own arguments, particularly those regarding learning to read, are more moral than I realize. But I seek, insofar as it is possible, to re-evaluate libertarian education on *educational* grounds, rather than moral ones.

The second issue that I bracket for purposes of this thesis is *structural inequality*. In order to counteract the libertarian educators’ strong view of the opposition between freedom and constraint, my account of social structures is fairly positive. However, although it is true that all structures enable (as I argue in Chapter Two), it is also true that current educational structures afford markedly different scopes of action to particular individuals and groups, resulting in correspondingly disparate learning opportunities and outcomes. I consider the conception of freedom that I develop in this thesis (see especially the section on “Evaluating structures” in Chapter Two) to be a useful way of thinking about the relationship between structure and inequality in education. But I do not explicitly discuss that connection here.

In the rest of this introduction I provide an outline of the chapters that follow.

Chapter outline

The first chapter deals directly with the tradition of libertarian education theory. In particular, I examine the writings of libertarian educators A. S. Neill, John Holt, and Ivan Illich with respect to freedom and education. For each writer, I first give some historical background to explain how he came to think and write about educational freedom. I then clarify his concept of freedom and the educational implications as he saw them. Finally, I critically evaluate his views of education and freedom. Although I find some of their ideas to be useful and deserving of further study, I ultimately conclude that their view of freedom and constraint as opposed to one another is too simplistic to account for the nature of educational freedom. Moreover, they failed to recognize learners' need for both exposure and guidance in order to be fully capable of self-education. For these reasons, I determine that a reconception of educational freedom is called for.

In the second chapter, I present the agency-within-structure model as a way to preserve the beneficial contributions of the libertarians to educational theory, while also addressing some of their shortcomings. I begin by briefly explaining structuralist and voluntarist views of human social action, and by comparing structuralism to the traditional education that libertarians criticize and voluntarism to the alternative that they propose. I then explain the agency-within-structure model that was developed as a response to structuralism and voluntarism. For this purpose I draw primarily on Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, supported by the work of practice theorist Sherry Ortner. According to Giddens and Ortner, *all* structure both enables and constrains human action, yet that very structure only exists as human agents enact it in their everyday lives. Rather than building a false dichotomy between freedom and constraint, I argue, this alternative model allows us to redefine freedom as the relative scope for social action that particular structures support. So free educational structures are those that are relatively friendly toward, rather than restrictive of, students' agency. After laying out the agency-within-structure model itself, I analyze

several applications of it. I first discuss two examples of relatively agency-friendly structures (Illich's convivial institutions and Henry Jenkins' participatory culture) and then examine the structures and constraints that were present, unacknowledged, in the libertarian educational theory of Neill and Holt.

In the second half of the thesis, I turn to a more specific discussion of one important aspect of education: learning to read. The goal of Chapter Three is to argue that the ability to read is necessary for the very possibility of libertarian education. I first give an overview of the libertarian educators' own views on the importance of learning to read. In general, they held a fairly lax or even (in the case of Neill) flippant attitude toward reading; this demonstrates the need for the arguments in this chapter. I then discuss two ways of defining reading: the skills approach and the social practice approach; I suggest that reading is best thought of as *both* a set of skills *and* a social practice. Once I have defined reading, I make the case that reading is distinctive among skills that learners might acquire because (in our society) it has a foundational relationship with the very possibility of educational choices. For this reason, even from the perspective a libertarian commitment to enabling children's freedom, learning to read cannot be left to the voluntary choices of individual children.

Where Chapter Three is concerned only with *why* a libertarian educator must require all children to acquire reading, the focus of the fourth and final chapter is *how* to do so in a way that supports children's control over their learning. I begin by explaining a consequence of the nature of agency-within-structure: because structures do not determine human action, the precise structures that are agency-enabling or agency-restricting will always be contingent upon considerations of (at the very least) the specific ages, cultures, abilities, and temperaments of the learners involved. Even so, the libertarian educators suggest some principles that would be a good

place to begin policy considerations in this area. After discussing these general principles, I give two examples of classroom structures for teaching reading: the “Daily 5” and Jenkins’ participatory culture. Neither of these would satisfy the libertarian educators’ definition of freedom as the absence of constraint. But I argue that the constraints of the Daily 5 and participatory culture enable students to control their own learning. So they are two visions of what a *relatively* free approach to teaching reading could look like.

I conclude the thesis with a brief reflection on Illich’s distinction between hope and expectation, found in the last chapter of *Deschooling Society*. I consider its connection to the conception of agency I have put forward in this thesis, and I sketch its implications for educational pedagogy, policy, and philosophy.

Chapter One: Libertarian Educational Theory

My goal in Chapter One is to give an overview of libertarian educational theory, as expressed by three prominent libertarian educators: A. S. Neill, John Holt, and Ivan Illich. Through a careful consideration of their writings I explore the questions and concerns they raise with respect to traditional education and the alternative educational approaches they propose.

I have defined libertarian educational theory in terms of its goal of maximizing the educational freedom of children and other learners. At this point the most important question is, What do we mean by “freedom”? As I analyze the educational theories of Neill, Holt, and Illich, I give particular attention to their respective conceptions of freedom. I also show how they all struggle, in different ways, with the tensions that arise when one attempts to give children greater freedom in education. I conclude my discussion of each theorist with my own initial evaluation of his views of educational freedom.

1.1 A. S. Neill

A. S. Neill put into practice the principle of student freedom more thoroughly than any other educator during his many decades as founder and long-time headmaster of Summerhill School in England. Before starting Summerhill, Neill had spent many years in various teaching positions, and he reacted strongly against the authoritarian and disciplinarian methods that were common in Scottish schools at the beginning of the twentieth century. After studying psychoanalysis, he came to the conclusion that “[t]he difficult child is the child who is unhappy” (1992: 7). In 1927 he and his wife started Summerhill School with the goal of allowing children to grow and find happiness in their own way and at their own pace. “In order to do this,” Neill says, “we had to renounce all discipline, all direction, all suggestion, all moral training, all religious instruction.” Only by doing so could they “allow children freedom to be themselves” (9).

1.1.1 Background

Summerhill is a residential (boarding) school in Suffolk, England. Its most frequently discussed features are self-government and non-compulsory lessons. The former is carried out via a weekly meeting of the entire Summerhill community to discuss matters of communal concern. At these meetings, anyone may raise an issue for the community to discuss, and anyone may offer his or her view on the issue being discussed. When the time comes to vote, each person has one vote, regardless of age or rank: as Neill says, “My [i.e., the headmaster’s] vote carries the same weight as that of a seven-year-old” (1992: 16). However, the school does not make *all* decisions by communal vote — only matters such as rules, inter-personal conflicts, and punishments. Neill or the staff decide about accepting new students and hiring new teachers, finances and purchases, and food and safety without consulting the children (18).

As for lessons, students have “freedom to go to lessons or stay away, freedom to play for days or weeks or years if necessary” (1992: 3). Teachers are not allowed to compel students to attend lessons, nor are other students supposed to compel their fellows away from lessons (though Neill admits that this sometimes happens). Another significant feature of the school was the total absence of moralized instruction. This included no religious instruction, and full acceptance of child and adolescent sexual activity. Both of these principles have caused the school considerable controversy over the years.

Neill died in 1973 (Matthias 1980). After his death, Neill’s wife took over the leadership of the school until 1985, when it passed to his daughter, Zoe Neill Readhead. More information about the school’s current circumstances can be found at its website, <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/>. Despite repeated battles with government regulations, Summerhill survives and continues to allow children to attend lessons or stay away, and to vote on an equal footing for all school rules.

1.1.2 Neill's conception of freedom

Neill articulates his view of freedom when he describes Summerhill School as having “[s]elf-government for the pupils and staff, freedom to go to lessons or stay away, freedom to play for days or weeks or years if necessary, freedom from any indoctrination whether religious or moral or political, freedom from character moulding” (1992: 3). He also gives a clear, seemingly simple definition of freedom: “Freedom means doing what you like, so long as you don’t interfere with the freedom of others. The result is self-discipline” (44). This definition gives a good indication Neill’s explicit conception of freedom, so I begin with it.

According to Neill, freedom consists in living under circumstances that allow an individual to do as she desires. Thus, because traditional schools require students to do certain things (e.g., learn mathematics) whether they *want* to or not, Neill calls those schools unfree; conversely, Summerhill is a free school because students are *not* required to attend lessons if they do not want to. We can infer that the only desires of relevance to freedom are those an individual desires *right now*. Her desires may change over time as she herself changes, but one may not appeal to what she might, should, or will desire in order to legitimate forcing her to act against her *present* desires. This is particularly important with respect to education, because educational requirements are frequently justified by claiming that children *will* be glad they were made to learn something when they are grown up, or that they *would* desire to learn it *if* they knew that it was more interesting or useful than they realized. According to Neill, however, neither ignorance nor immaturity can detract from an individual’s freedom, but only external coercion. And forcing an individual to act against her desires is *always* coercion (with one exception, to be discussed below), regardless of whether the one coercing has greater knowledge or maturity than the one whose freedom is reduced.

Neill acknowledged exactly one situation in which an individual's carrying out of her present desires – her freedom – may *legitimately* be restricted: if the action the individual desires to do harms someone else, then it is acceptable to interfere. This is his famous distinction between freedom (which concerns only oneself) and license (which harms other people). Neill has been much criticized for inconsistently applying this distinction to particular cases, and at times he is altogether vague about the limits of freedom. For example, although he defines self-regulation as the result of “doing what you like, so long as you don't interfere with the freedom of others” (1992: 44), elsewhere he says, “self-regulation, like any theoretical idea, is dangerous if not combined with common sense” (37). He gives no theoretical analysis of the concept of “common sense,” but offers instead several examples (bars on bedroom doors, firescreens, locks on cabinets that contain poisonous chemicals), each of which has to do, not with protecting others from the individual, but with protecting the individual herself – specifically, protecting her from her ignorance or immature recklessness with respect to danger. Barrett (1981) has further analyzed Neill's concept of license; here it is sufficient to note that Neill *explicitly* accepts restrictions of freedom only for the sake of preventing harm to others.

Neill's description of Summerhill School, quoted at the beginning of this section, adds some details that are useful for understanding his more general definition of freedom as doing what one wants to. First, it is important to note that Neill includes both “freedoms *to*” and “freedoms *from*.” In theory, students are equally free either to stay away from lessons *or* to go to them. They are not only free *from* external “character moulding” (1992: 3) into the kind of person the adults think they should be; they are just as free *to* discover and express themselves through play. Thus, Neill's conception of freedom has two parts: the absence of coercion to do what is undesired or not do what is desired, *and* the presence of access to what is desired. It is not at all

certain that Summerhill actually afforded its students both parts of freedom, a criticism to which I will return below; for now, I merely observe that Neill's explicit account of freedom recognizes the need for both.

Moreover, this list of freedoms displays considerable tension between viewing human persons as independent individuals and viewing them as social and communal beings — a tension found throughout Neill's account of Summerhill. In his own words, "In Summerhill, there is one perennial problem that can never be solved; it might be called the problem of *the individual v. the community*" (1992: 27, emphasis original). On the one hand, Neill's whole project is to set children free from what he deems to be inappropriate adult influence, coercion, and indoctrination (3); each child's unique desires, not society's expectations, are to dictate what and when the child learns or plays. More generally, Neill's distaste for organizations and institutions (148) indicates that his sympathies lie with the individual rather than the larger society. On the other hand, there are also numerous indicators that the social nature of human beings is also important to him. He is worried about students who are either antisocial or asocial, and he speaks highly of those who have reached the "social age" (25). Perhaps most significantly, he lists freedom of self-government — a freedom that can only be had collectively, not individually — as the very first defining freedom of Summerhill (3).

Self-government should not be confused with *self-regulation*. Self-regulation, as I have discussed already, involves "doing what you like, so long as you don't interfere with the freedom of others" (1992: 44). Self-government might be thought of as the extension of this freedom from the individual to the community; it means that whenever there must be a law (Neill's favorite example is rules about bedtimes), the law is both made and enforced by an absolute democracy in which each member of the community can express his opinion and then cast his vote equally with every

other member. At the same time, self-government also means that individual community members must abide by decisions that have been made this way. To clarify this point, Neill distinguishes two kinds of anarchy: “If anarchy means literally without law, Summerhill with its self-government is miles from that. On the other hand, if anarchy means being anti laws made by authorities, I am an anarchist” (18).

Neill acknowledges with some discomfort two facts about Summerhill: laws made by majority vote can be displeasing to the losing minority (1992: 21-22), and decisions made for the sake of the individual can be significantly detrimental to the community, particularly in cases of habitual bullying (e.g., 27, 129). I do not think he ever resolved this tension between humans’ individuality and their socialness — if indeed it is possible to resolve it; but what is significant is that he recognized that the tension exists and, through self-government, sought to create what he considered “an excellent compromise” (27).

1.1.3 Evaluation

Several of Neill’s educational innovations, controversial in his own time, appear as obvious improvements to us today. When we read about parents “put[ting] cayenne pepper on a baby’s thumb to stop sucking” or raising their children “on a tissue of lies and ignorant prohibitions” (1992: 45), we remember the child-rearing practices that he reacted to so fiercely. And even a religious believer who considered Neill’s pronouncements about God to be unacceptably irreverent (124) would be likely to agree with his rejection of religious instruction based solely on fear, punishment, and bribery (117-119).

However, his conception of freedom is lacking in some significant areas, in particular when compared with the realities of Summerhill School. To begin with, although he sought to free the individual (or more specifically, individual children) from societal influences, he downplayed at

least four key ways in which society necessarily does influence the individual. First, as I have already discussed, caregivers limit children's self-regulation for the sake of their own safety, not only the safety of others (1992: 36). Second, even at Summerhill, numerous decisions that affected the daily lives of the children were not decided by general vote but by Neill or another member of the staff: meals, the hiring and firing of staff, bedroom arrangements, textbooks. Neill dismisses these non-democratic decisions: "None of these factors comes into self-government. Nor do the pupils want them to. Self-government to them means dealing with situations that arise in their communal life" (18). Of course, one might wonder whether the children were *really* indifferent about these matters, or might have cared about them had they been given the chance to be involved in the decision. But the more important point is that Neill downplayed the extent to which such decisions affected the children's lives and choices.

Third, even without explicit coercion, children are persuaded toward and away from certain actions by observing and interacting with both their peers and the adults in their community. For example, although the adults at Summerhill were not supposed to force children to attend lessons, children could and did keep each other away from lessons (1992: 129). Neill bemoaned this occurrence, but in fact it was inevitable. And fourth, it is not only other *individuals* that exert influence over the individuals with whom they interact; societal *structures* do so, as well. A prime example of this is the General Meetings that enable Summerhill to be a self-governing community. I discuss the structures inherent in these meetings, and their relationship with the students' freedom, in the next chapter.

My second major criticism is that Summerhill provided insufficient freedom *to* do and learn. To illustrate this, consider Neill's story of a young student, Winifred, who came to Summerhill at age thirteen. She was overjoyed when she found out she was no longer required to

go to lessons or study any subject she did not want to. However, a few weeks later she grew bored and asked Neill to teach her something. He asked what she wanted to learn, but she said she didn't know. Several months later she asked him to help her pass the college entrance exams. He concludes the anecdote with this self-satisfied report: "Every morning she worked with me and other teachers, and she worked well. She confided that the subjects did not interest her much, but the aim *did* interest her. Winifred found herself by being allowed to be herself" (1992: 126). Yet it seems just as likely that she found, not herself, but the only conceivable alternative to boredom. A student of thirteen cannot know all the potential options for learning, especially if, before arriving at Summerhill, she has spent most of her life at a school with a traditional academic curriculum chosen by adults rather than by children. If, instead of forcing her to choose all by herself what she wanted to learn, Neill had offered a sample of possible topics or skills, her final decision might have been much more interesting to her than the subjects required for the college entrance exams. In Chapter Two I analyze the case of Winifred in greater detail; here I merely note it as an overall problem with Neill's approach to education.

In general, Neill assumes that each child inherently either does or does not have a given interest. This belief has two educational implications: requiring students to learn a certain subject will not generate an interest that was not there to begin with, and students *will* pursue learning in their areas of interest, regardless of what kind of instruction the school offers in that subject. As he explains,

We have no new methods of teaching [at Summerhill], because we do not consider that teaching in itself matters very much. Whether a school has or has not a special method for teaching long division is of no significance, for long division is of no importance except to those who *want* to learn it. And the child who *wants* to learn long division *will* learn it no matter how it is taught. (1992: 9, emphasis original)

Furthermore, not only will children learn whatever they are interested in regardless of how it is taught, they will supposedly find a way to learn it even if the school does not offer it *at all*. In response to “[t]he most frequent question asked by Summerhill visitors... ‘Won’t the child turn round and blame the school for not making him learn arithmetic or music?’ ” Neill claims that “young Freddy Beethoven and young Tommy Einstein will refuse to be kept away from their respective spheres” (15). This assertion assumes that children have certain spheres *inherently*, irrespective of the culture, location, or historical moment into which they are born.

But these assumptions are altogether unfounded. No matter how great an aptitude a child has in a particular area, she will never put that aptitude into practice unless she is exposed to that subject or skill in the first place. If Beethoven had been born into a culture or even a family that knew nothing of music or did not value musical ability highly, he would never have become such a great composer. Moreover, children (like all people) gain and lose interests through their interactions with others. This is manifestly the case for children’s non-academic interests: whether books or music, movies or games, they learn about them and learn to love (or hate) them under the influence of peers and adults.⁸ And just as one person can pass his or her interests on to another, so too one person’s actions can (intentionally or unintentionally) detract from another’s interest. For this reason, teaching methods *do* matter, even when the learner is highly interested already.

The point is that the individual’s desires, which (Neill says) she is able to act on if and only if she is free, are far more complicated than Neill suggests. Her own knowledge or ignorance, dependent on her prior experience and exposure, deeply affects her present desires. In addition, the interests, attitudes, and actions of those around her — both peers and adults — can create or

⁸ For a detailed exploration of how interests move among children’s peer groups, see Pugh (2009).

destroy desires, and increase or decrease the strength of her desires. So her freedom is not a matter of herself alone, but is closely tied to her social relationships and interactions.

To summarize, Neill raises some interesting concerns about traditional schooling, but his proposed alternative is theoretically lacking. In particular, his conception of freedom and his account of free education at Summerhill downplay the role of social structures and influences in shaping the choices of even those individuals who are relatively “free” by Neill’s own definition (that is, they are neither required to do things they do not want to nor prevented from doing whatever they do want to, except under certain special circumstances). Moreover, he did not recognize the ways that both social interactions and the available options contribute to an individual’s desire to learn this or that. Consequently, he did not see the need for either exposing children to a variety of areas of learning or guiding them in choosing what and how to learn. These critiques will continue to surface as I discuss other libertarian educators.

1.2 John Holt

John Holt, an American classroom teacher, began to think about freedom in education in much the same way that Neill did: by noticing and reacting to the effects of traditional schooling on individual children. As he devoted his life to finding alternative ways to help children learn and grow, he found much inspiration in Neill’s approach, but much to criticize as well. Because of his critical appropriation from Neill’s writings, his own educational thought became more moderate and nuanced.

1.2.1 Background

Holt’s first book, *How Children Fail* (1964), recounts his work with fifth graders who struggled in math and reading. He observed that the very same children who seemed unable to think rationally about their classroom work appeared quite intelligent outside of the classroom. In his next book,

How Children Learn (1967), he watched very young children learning constantly, eagerly, and without adult coercion or even instruction. He was profoundly affected by the contrast between young children for whom learning appeared so natural and so delightful and school-age children who struggled so much with academic learning. It was not long before he reached the conclusion that “school is a place where children learn to be stupid” (1964: 157).

At first, Holt advocated reforming schools to make classrooms freer and learning more interest-driven. But over the years he became increasingly disillusioned with the project of traditional school reform. Eventually he began urging concerned parents to remove their children from formal schooling altogether. During the latter years of his life, he was influential in the legalization of home education. In this thesis I do not attempt to trace the history of the early homeschooling movement, or Holt’s role in forming the “unschooling” branch of that movement; for more about Holt’s life, work, and legacy, see <http://www.johnholtgws.com/>.

Although I reference Holt’s earlier and later writings, I draw primarily from Holt’s 1972 book, *Freedom and Beyond*. This work represents a turning point in his intellectual career, as he transitioned from pushing for intra-classroom reforms to rethinking the entire institution of schooling itself. Thus, in this work we can clearly see him wrestling with the concept of freedom and its educational implications. This particular book is also bolder than some of his earlier writings, in which he was just beginning to question his assumptions about schools and learning. Yet, helpfully for my purposes, it is still directly concerned with classroom and school contexts — unlike his later work, which became increasingly focused on out-of-school and informal learning.

1.2.2 Holt’s conception of freedom

I first examine Holt’s *positive* conception of educational freedom, before considering what he sees to be perversions or misunderstandings of freedom. Neill defined freedom briefly as “doing what

you like, so long as you don't interfere with the freedom of others" (1992: 44); Holt has a comparable, slogan-like definition: "What I mean by freedom for children – and for all people – is More Choice, Less Fear" (1972: 20). As I demonstrated with Neill, so too Holt recognizes both freedom *from* and freedom *to*: in this case, freedom *from* fear and freedom *to* choose. I begin with freedom from fear.

Holt describes two major freedoms that make up freedom from fear. The first is freedom to say no – to an activity, a subject, an idea, or a belief. It is harder than it seems to achieve this freedom; as Holt explains,

Many of us may coerce without meaning to. The question is, what kind of influence do we exercise over other people, what kind of open or hidden pressure do we put on them, what chance do we give them to say No, what do they risk if they do it? ... There is no use in our offering a choice to someone unless we can make him feel that it is a real choice, that he has an equal right to choose either way, that he can do so without having to worry about disappointing us or losing our friendship. (1972: 70)

This freedom requires much more than merely the absence of physical or legal restraints. Holt points to all the ways we can make children (or adults) feel that they have no option but to agree with us or to do what we say. Furthermore, if they only agree with us because they fear losing our friendship, or getting a poor grade, or some other undesirable outcome, then according to Holt they are not really agreeing with us at all. "I have learned that no one can truly say Yes to an idea, mine or anyone else's, unless he can freely say No to it" (1976: 5).

Freedom to say no is necessary in order to have freedom from fear; so too is freedom to fail. In his first book, Holt puts forward the idea that the institution of schooling teaches children to fear failure in school. Children, particularly those who do not "get it" immediately, come to distrust their own thought processes, relying instead on adult approval or disapproval to find out whether their answers are right or wrong. This can have two different effects, both originating in fear of

failure. Holt argues that both of these effects undermine the natural human ability to learn. For some children, the pressure caused by their desperate need to succeed in the eyes of the adults may become so great that they buckle under it, choosing instead not to even try:

For, after all, if *they* (meaning we) know that you can't do anything, *they* won't expect you to do anything, and *they* won't blame you or punish you for not being able to do what you have been told to do... When you set out to fail, one thing is certain — you can't be disappointed. (1964: 58-59, emphasis original)

Other children continue to strive for elusive success, but they turn from “thinkers” into “producers” — that is, they stop trying “to think about the meaning, the reality, of whatever it was [they were] working on” and instead become “only interested in getting right answers” (3).

The poor thinker dashes madly after an answer; the good thinker takes his time and looks at the problem... The good thinker can take his time because he can tolerate uncertainty, he can stand not knowing. The poor thinker can't stand not knowing; it drives him crazy. (47)

Notice that both types of children are characterized by their *desperate need* to “get it right” in the eyes of the adults; in other words, they are both afraid of failure and the consequences of being perceived as failures by those in charge (i.e., teachers and parents). Ironically and unfortunately, these children's fears of failing and of being failures contribute to their learning difficulties: “For to make not knowing something a disgrace is to make it certain that many people will never learn it” (1972: 223). Thus, the only way these students can be freed from their fear of failure, freed to learn the very things they feared not learning, is for them to be free to fail — that is, to *not* learn right away, on their first try, or when and how someone *else* says they must learn.

Freedom *from* fear is one side of Holt's conception of freedom; freedom *to* choose is the other. We have already gotten a hint of this: people must be free to choose between agreeing and disagreeing, doing and not doing, or they are not free at all. Indeed, Holt directly opposes choice to coercion and constraint:

The most we can do is put within reach certain choices, and remove certain coercions and constraints... We have to assume, or at least I choose to, that in the long run more choices and fewer constraints, less coercion, less fear, is good for most people – if only because it gives them *a chance to look for and maybe find something that they really want.* (1972: 85, emphasis mine)

That last part is vital. It is not enough merely to *not* have to do something you don't want to; Holt recognized, more than Neill explicitly did, that having access *to* the things you *do* want to do is an indispensable part of freedom, especially in education. "All too often teachers or schools say to children, 'Now you can do anything you want,' when in fact there is nothing to do" (86). He describes visiting a school that had tried to give children greater freedom in how they spent their time, but "couldn't figure out why the children didn't seem to want to do anything but run around and bother each other.... As tactfully as I could I tried to suggest that it wasn't much help to tell the children they could do what they wanted if there was in fact almost nothing for them *to do*" (86). Choices are, for Holt, necessary for freedom – and they must be real choices, from among a variety of legitimate options, not merely the possibility of refusing what is offered.

At the same time, Holt also recognizes that people do not always respond positively to an increase in their choices. "If it is frustrating to be told to choose when there is nothing to choose from, it may be frightening, confusing, and paralyzing to have too much to choose from, like a child in a huge toy store" (1972: 86). If this is so, then are we better off protecting children from such a scary, daunting task as choosing? Holt answers no, for two reasons. First, although it is always the case that "[t]o choose is to risk" (82), yet "the anxiety of choosing" (86) may be heightened in the case of students whose experiences in school have given them a great fear of failure. "They learn in school... that since to fail is the worst thing of all, it is best to take no chances" (82). Once they are freed from their fear of failure, they will also be free to choose. And how much more willingly would they choose, if they never learned to fear failure in the first place!

The second reason why we should not back away from giving students choices is that we can *gradually* increase their choices, beginning with only a couple of options and slowly adding more (1972: 87). This possibility is key to understanding Holt's conception of freedom: unlike Neill, who seemed to view freedom, choice, and constraint in terms of all-or-nothing (an individual or an action is either *free* or *not free*), Holt recognizes a spectrum of situations, ranging from more coercive and limiting to more free and open. He tells the story of one of his classrooms, in which he gradually gave more and more children "free" periods when "they could do anything they wanted... provided it was within the classroom and did not disturb the rest of the building." He concludes, "I don't think the children felt that the class was basically like the ones they had been used to, or that their choices were not real because not unlimited" (88-89). This idea, that limited choices are still real choices, makes it possible for Holt to evaluate classrooms and schools on the basis of their *relative* freedom. In this way Holt differs significantly from Neill, who dismisses as entirely unfree any environment that does not fully meet his own standard of freedom.

As Holt's thought progressed, one particular kind of choice became especially important to him: freedom of *attendance*. Toward the end of *Freedom and Beyond* (1972: 243-247), he describes compulsory schools in strong words as "jails" and "corrals" for children. As long as children must attend *this* school rather than *that*, he says, we can never find out which schools are really good at helping them to learn; moreover, we (and they) can also never find out what they would really like to do, if they did not have to be in school at all (61-64, 245). He describes *several* ways to give students greater freedom in how they comply with compulsory attendance laws, further demonstrating his reasonable attitude toward *relative* freedoms⁹.

⁹ Later on, Holt instead began to push for freedom of *non-attendance*: the option to not go to formal school at all, to do all of one's learning at home and in the community.

1.2.3 What freedom is *not*

Holt is more thorough than Neill in discussing misunderstandings or misuses of freedom. For Neill, the only perversion of freedom is license, which he understands as actions that harm other people or interfere with their freedom. But Holt goes further, differentiating freedom from both lack of authority and lack of structure.

With respect to authority, he distinguishes between “the authority of age” and “the authority of greater experience and understanding” (1972: 52). The former is “‘adult authority,’ some kind of general and permanent right and duty to tell children what to do,” while the latter has to do with differences in knowledge about the dangers that may arise in certain kinds of situations (much like Neill’s “common sense”). One may have the authority of experience regardless of one’s age. Holt implies that, when we exercise the authority of experience (but *not* the authority of age), we do no harm to students’ freedom; indeed, we may actually be *helping* them to be more free: “Children feel safer, freer to live and to explore, if they feel that people are protecting them from situations in which they might get badly hurt” (52). He later says that adults are justified in making children fear punishment only when the true danger is beyond their present understanding. Yet he emphasizes the limitations on this principle: “only when it is necessary to protect the life, health, safety, or well-being of people or other living creatures, or to prevent destruction of things that people care about” (104). Here, Holt combines Neill’s prohibition of license and his call for common sense in self-regulation: sometimes, children’s desired actions are prone to cause harm to other people or even to themselves, and they are either ignorant of or apathetic toward the danger; in those cases – but *only* in those cases – can adults safely interfere without damaging the children’s freedom.

Ultimately, the implications and effects of any exercise of authority will be largely dependent on the specific context in which it is exercised – and not least of all, the attitudes and

dispositions of the child in question. In his review of Neill's work at Summerhill, Holt takes up the matter of bedtimes. Neill repeatedly mentions the democratic way in which children at Summerhill determine what time they must go to bed; he is particularly proud that it is not the adults but the children themselves who enforce these rules. But Holt points out,

There are many ways of telling a child that he must go to bed at a certain hour. A may sincerely believe that if the child is not told when to go to bed, his sleep and his health will suffer, and that he will develop bad habits. B may sincerely believe that a child expects, needs, and demands to be told when to go to bed. C may simply sweep a child off to bed at a certain hour because he wants to get him out of the way. D may tell him to go to bed, as he tells him many other things, because he thinks it is good for the child to be made to do what he doesn't want to do... these differences make all the difference, and the difference they make varies much from one child to another. (Hart 1970: 87)

Because freedom is so contextual, it is not always clear *how* Holt distinguishes between legitimate, freedom-enabling authority and inappropriate, freedom-reducing authority (although the above distinction between the authority of age and the authority of experience is certainly one important criterion). But what *is* clear is that authority is not *always* opposed to freedom. More authority does not *necessarily* mean less freedom; sometimes, in fact, the opposite is true.

Just as Holt rejects the opposition between freedom and authority, so too he argues against the distinction between structured and unstructured situations. "There are no such things as 'unstructured' situations. They are not possible. Every human situation, however casual and unforced... has a structure" (1972: 9). The difference between traditional schooling and the free education that Holt advocates is not that the former is structured and the latter unstructured; rather, they have "two different kinds of structure" (10). And, as with authority, those differences make all the difference. Holt analyzes what he considers to be the more significant differences between traditional and open classrooms:

We might say that the structure of the traditional classroom is very simple... The second thing we can say of this structure is that it is inflexible, rigid, and static... The

third thing we can say of this structure is that it is arbitrary and external... By contrast, the structure of the open class is complicated... Secondly, the structure is flexible and dynamic... Finally, the structure is organic, internal. (11)

Thus, in Holt's view, neither authority nor structure is inherently opposed to freedom; on the contrary, the *nature* of the structure in place greatly affects the degree and kinds of freedom that children have.

As Holt continued to think about problems of freedom and education, he increasingly turned his attention to one structure in particular: the institution of school. Although the structure *within* the classroom can be freer or more restrictive, the problem of school *as institution* remains. And that problem is that institutional schools have gained a monopoly on learning — or at least, learning that is widely and officially recognized as legitimate.

Almost all societies and people now *define* education or learning as schooling, and measure people's intelligence, competence, job-worthiness, and capacity for further learning almost entirely in terms of the length in years and the expense of the schooling they have already received. (1972: 118, emphasis original)

The idea that everything important must be learned in school is very new. Until quite recently, most people understood very well that while some things might be learned best in school, others could be learned as well or better out of school, and many could not be learned in school at all. (1976: 10)

Yet Holt's solution is not to do away with institutions altogether; rather, it is to change the *type* of institutions we have, so that they are both non-compulsory and open to people who are not officially designated as students. He suggests many ways, some more far-fetched than others, to put more resources into creating "those institutions that are truly open and educative and in which more and more people might learn for themselves" (1972: 127). This idea of open institutions for self-education was developed more fully by the next libertarian educator, Ivan Illich.

1.2.4 Evaluation

As the analysis above demonstrates, Holt's vision of educational freedom is less extreme than Neill's. He gives greater weight than Neill does to the need to first help children find something they want to do and then help them do it. The twin values of freedom *from* fear and freedom *to* choose are generally balanced in Holt's writing, whereas Neill overemphasized freedom *from* coercion and fear and believed that freedom *to* act and learn would come about on its own. This balance, together with Holt's recognition that authority, structure, and even institutions can all contribute to children's freedom, suggests ways of evaluating different educational policies and practices as *relatively* more or less free.

However, Holt's work also has shortcomings. Specifically, he is not always careful to analyze his own concepts and the principles he builds from them. A good example of this is the term 'constraint.' Early in *Freedom and Beyond*, Holt explains, "As there is no life without structure, so there is no life without constraints... what is important is not whether there are limits but how much choice we have within those limits" (1972: 17). Yet later he contrasts constraints with freedom and choice: "The most we can do is put within reach certain choices, and remove certain coercions and constraints... We have to assume, or at least I choose to, that in the long run more choices and fewer constraints, less coercion, less fear, is good for most people" (85). The apparent conflict between these two statements arises from the slipperiness of Holt's use of 'constraint'. In the first quote, 'constraint' is comparable to 'structure,' while in the second it is closer to 'coercion.' Yet in both contexts Holt implies that the difference is one of quantity: "*how much* choice, *more* choices, *fewer* constraints, *less* coercion, *less* fear." But this cannot be completely correct; as I have already hinted, the *type* of structures or constraints also matters.

Is Holt's work then too unclear and inconsistent to be useful? I do not think so. Whereas Neill was primarily interested in giving children free lives and letting them get whatever education

they chose, Holt is more concerned with the specific problem of freedom *in education*. For this reason, he is sensitive to the many tensions that arise from trying to introduce greater freedom into educational contexts, such as classrooms and schools (see, e.g., 1972: 26-48). Although we must be careful to clarify the principles underlying his highly anecdotal discussions, many of his ideas can help us imagine possibilities giving students greater freedom within existing educational structures.

1.3 Ivan Illich

The last libertarian educator I discuss, Ivan Illich, argues against traditional education in a significantly different way from those of Neill and Holt. Much as they do, he critiques schooling as “the age-specific, teacher-related process requiring full-time attendance at an obligatory curriculum” (1970: 26); but where they focus primarily on the negative effects of institutionalized schooling on individual children, Illich worries instead about consequences for the attitude and expectations of society as a whole. Despite this different emphasis, however, Illich discusses some of the same problems as Neill and Holt do; moreover, his institutional-level analysis balances out the romanticism of their overly individualistic conceptions of freedom.

1.3.1 Background

Illich was born in 1926 to wealthy eastern European parents (Cayley 2005: 1). After completing his education and becoming ordained as a Catholic priest, he took a position in Manhattan in the 1950s; during that time he “pressed the American Church to recognize and make room for” the many Puerto Rican immigrants that had settled there (2). Several years later he was made “vice-rector of the Catholic University in Puerto Rico” (3), where he first grew concerned about compulsory schooling. Illich’s biographer says that at that time “[t]wo things particularly struck him: the surprisingly church-like character of the institution of schooling, and the strange

discrepancy between the claims made for schooling and its actual results” (3). Both of these ideas are reflected in his later educational writings.

In 1961 Illich founded what was to become the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC) at Cuernavaca, Mexico. Over the next decade it grew into “what probably can be best described as a free university, hosting seminars which attracted reform-minded thinkers from around the world” (Cayley 2005: 10). At this time, Illich sharply criticized the efforts of first-world countries to aid ‘development’ in the third world; not only was this a form of “cultural imperialism” (Valenzuela-Aguilera 2008: 16), but it also destroyed the abilities of traditional communities to subsist on their own resources and to bear hardships. In addition, he pushed the Catholic Church to disentangle itself from political causes and organizations, largely to no avail. On the basis of conversations at CIDOC, Illich published four books for popular audiences, summarizing the views he had developed there. The first of these, *Deschooling Society* (1970), is a collection of simple yet thoughtful essays exploring the societal effects of widespread, compulsory school attendance. I draw my discussion of Illich’s educational thought from this work.

1.3.2 Illich’s conception of freedom

Unlike Neill and Holt, Illich does not offer a simple, slogan-like statement concerning freedom. Instead, we must derive his conception of freedom from his analysis of modern schooling. In contrast to the individualism of Neill’s and Holt’s conceptions of freedom, Illich holds that institutions as well as individuals can be free or unfree. So I discuss Illich’s ideas about both learners and the institutions in which they pursue learning. In addition, because it is often helpful to understand a concept by considering its negative, I examine what Illich has to say about *unfree* learners and institutions as well as *free* ones. Thus, I use a fourfold division (unfree learners,

unfree institutions, free learners, free institutions) to give a multifaceted picture of Illich's conception of educational freedom.

For Illich, the primary characteristic of unfree learners is *dependency* (1970: 2). Specifically, unfree learners are dependent on *teachers* for their learning (that is, they are unable to *learn* without being *taught*), and they are dependent on *schools* for access to instruction. It is important to note here that Illich does not believe anyone *actually* is incapable of untaught learning — on the contrary, he frequently emphasizes that most learning does *not* require direct, planned instruction. “In fact, learning is the human activity which least needs manipulation by others. Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting” (39). Schools do not change the fundamental nature of human learning, but they do change learners' *views* of human learning. “Most people learn best by being ‘with it,’ yet school makes them identify their personal, cognitive growth with elaborate planning and manipulation” (39). Thus, unfree learners *could* learn on their own — but they don't realize this. They *expect* to be unable to learn without teaching, and so they never attempt to do otherwise. Thus, their view of themselves as dependent learners becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Illich argues that all schooled learners equate learning with teaching in this way, but the ones who do so most noticeably — and most devastatingly — are those who have been least “successful” according to the schools' standard: those who drop out of formal schooling before reaching what society considers to be the “right” leaving age. In addition to “their original poverty,” children who do not finish the socially necessary amount of schooling bear the burden of “the self-inflicted discrimination accepted by the dropout” (1970: 44). In other words, dropouts, just as much as graduates, have internalized the schooled view of learning. They both believe that school attendance is the “right” way to get the learning needed for success in life, and that “they were given

a chance, albeit an unequal one, in an obligatory lottery” (44). Whatever they made of their opportunity for schooling is their business, and whatever life situation they find themselves in as a result of the amount of schooling they completed is their just reward. In Illich’s picture, dropouts and graduates differ primarily in that graduates gain access to further formal schooling, while dropouts are barred from it. But both dropouts *and* graduates lose access to informal or alternative ways of learning, because both have learned not to seek them.

Of course, unfree learners do not just decide to view learning as dependent on schools and teachers; they acquire this mindset implicitly through forced participation in unfree institutions. If schooled learners do not see themselves as potential self-teachers, it is because the institution of schooling has discredited self-taught men and women (1970: 39). Illich stresses that the institution of schooling primarily “teach[es] the need to be taught. Once this lesson is learned, people lose their incentive to grow in independence” (47). Just as the key characteristic of unfree *learners* was their dependence on programmed, institutionally delivered instruction, so the key characteristic of unfree *institutions* is that they engender such dependence.

But there is more to say about unfree institutions. First, Illich says that unfree institutions do grant their participants a sort of freedom; but that freedom “is reduced to a selection among packaged commodities” (70). The fact that a learner is free to choose among different courses, majors, or even schools can never outweigh the fact that she cannot choose to make up her own course or major, or to pursue learning outside of a formal institution altogether. Whatever the prepackaged “choices” on offer may be, the fact remains that they are devised by someone other than the learner — thereby increasing the learner’s dependence.

Educational endeavors are further deprived of freedom by institutional reliance on certification, both of learners (1970: 11) and of teachers (90). Certifications for learners (in the

form of grades, test scores, and especially institutionally-granted diplomas) serve as prerequisites for access to further learning; certifications for teachers serve as permissions to offer instruction. Illich is not opposed to prerequisites as such. Rather, he advocates “discrimination only on the basis of tested skills and not on the basis of educational pedigree” (91). The idea is that a learner should be allowed to learn (or attempt to learn) whatever she is able to, without regard to where she acquired the prerequisite knowledge and skills – and *particularly* without regard to how expensive her previous training was.

Lastly, obligatory age-based schooling is an unfree institution because it restricts freedom of association for those who fall under the mandatory attendance laws (1970: 92-93). Children in school learn “that they should select their friends from among those with whom they are put together” by institutions, whether those be schools, sports teams, workplaces, churches, etc. Illich’s demand for freedom of association is the positive corollary of Holt’s plea for freedom of (non)attendance: an institution that requires a certain segment of the population to be at a certain place for an extensive, predetermined time is, necessarily, unfree in this way. How much better, Illich suggests, would be an institution that allowed for association among “persons who at a given moment shared the same specific interest” (92). Of course, we must ask how those interests come into existence in the first place, and whether people who meet together on the basis of shared interests over an extended period of time might not be likely to start institutions such as sports teams, businesses, churches, and even schools. Illich, like Neill and Holt, fails to recognize that we discover and pursue our interests in deeply social ways.

If unfree learners are dependent on institutions and teachers to package and deliver their learning, then free learners are the opposite: independent. This does not necessarily mean that they do not make use of formal instruction and even institutions that look a lot like traditional

schools. But they do so for their own purposes, not those determined by others; in other words, they “tak[e] control of their own learning” (1970: 8). Free, independent learners are characterized by “action, participation, and self-help... autonomy [and] motivation” (64, 104). If a free learner wants to learn something, she is able to set her own learning goals (perhaps with the help of a friend or teacher), to seek out the most effective means *for herself* (which may differ from what is most effective for a different learner), and to actively pursue her goals (again, possibly in conjunction with a role model or peers). She does not have to be constantly reminded to complete her learning tasks, nor must she be externally rewarded for doing so. She is motivated by purposes of her own.

As this description indicates, Illich is fully aware that even free learners need access to resources; they cannot pursue their own, self-generated learning goals in a vacuum. Illich suggests four types of resources:

Someone who wants to learn knows that he needs both information and critical response to its use from somebody else. Information can be stored in *things* and in *persons*... Criticism can also come from two directions: from *peers* or from *elders*, that is, from fellow learners whose immediate interests match mine, or from those who will grant me a share in their superior experience. (1970: 78)

So learners need some way to access educational objects, role models and instructors, peers with mutual interests, and elders with wisdom to share. This is a much more thorough account of the *positive* resources needed for self-education than either Neill or Holt had to offer.

But the problem of providing access to such resources remains. It is not sufficient for learners to stumble upon the necessary resources in a haphazard fashion (though even that would be better than being unable to access them at all). Rather, to facilitate learning, we need some sort of structure for connecting learners with these different types of resources for learning; in fact, we may even need institutions for doing so. But Illich believes that obligatory, age-graded, curriculum-

oriented schools engender the exact opposite of independent, autonomous learning. Clearly, we need some vision of what a free institution would look like.

Like Holt, Illich has numerous suggestions for how to open up access to educational resources and provide opportunities for student-driven learning outside of traditional schools. The details of his suggestions are not important for this thesis, but rather the general description he gives of free institutions.

A good educational system should have three purposes: it should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with an opportunity to make their challenge known. (1970: 75)

Notice the verbs here: free educational institutions “*provide... access to available resources, empower [the sharing of knowledge and skills], and furnish opportunit[ies] [for public discussion].*”

Any institution that does these things is supportive of free learning. Any institution that does the opposite — that restricts access to resources (by making them available only to a selection of the population, whether determined by status, wealth, or age), disempowers those who would share what they know (by requiring them to be certified by and to teach in institutions of mandatory attendance), and removes opportunities for dialogue among diverse groups — such an institution, whatever other merits it may claim, is fundamentally unfree.

1.3.3 Convivial vs. manipulative institutions

Illich introduces a pair of terms for distinguishing between free and unfree institutions: free institutions are “convivial,” and unfree institutions are “manipulative” (1970: 53). Convivial institutions “exist to be used rather than to produce something” (55), while manipulative institutions are just the opposite. The “product” created by unfree institutions may be a physical object or a service such as schooling or healthcare (which Illich often calls “treatments”). But

whatever they produce, these institutions exist to produce more of it, whether or not anyone actually desires those products. Then, in order to justify their existence, manipulative institutions have to create societal or psychological demand for their products; thus, “much of the elaboration and expense is concerned with convincing consumers that they cannot live without the product or the treatment offered by the institution.” Manipulative institutions may even generate rules that “call for unwilling consumption or participation.” In contrast, “[t]he rules which govern institutions for use [that is, convivial institutions] have mainly the purpose of avoiding abuses which would frustrate their general accessibility.” This regulation “sets limits to their use;” it never forces people to use the institution if they do not want to.

Illich emphasizes the role of willing or unwilling use in making an institution convivial (i.e., free) or manipulative (i.e., unfree). He describes unfree institutions as “funnels” and free ones as “webs” (1970: vii). A funnel corrals all learners into one predetermined learning path, regardless of individual learners’ needs and desires. A web, on the other hand, allows for a multitude of diverse learning moments — diverse both across different learners and within one learner’s lifetime. The goal of a web is “the autonomous assembly of resources under the personal control of each learner” (70); free, web-like institutions “develop... independence and learning” (77). In contrast, the goal of a funnel is to deliver “packages” of learning to its “clients” (i.e., students); thus, manipulative, funnel-like institutions develop “bureaucracy and teaching.”¹⁰

Drawing all these ideas together, Illich suggests that the fundamental difference is that between hope in persons and expectation for processes. “Hope centers on a person from whom we await a gift. Expectation looks forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will

¹⁰ Illich is not opposed to teaching *as such*; rather, he protests the dependence of the learner on institutionally determined learning goals and teacher-packaged instruction.

produce what we have the right to claim” (1970: 105). If manipulative institutions have been properly planned and executed, we can count on them to deliver the same results time after time — just as calculator will spit out the same answer *every* time we give it the same calculation to perform. But in removing the possibility of failure, these institutions (traditional schools among them) also close off space for creativity, change, and freedom. By advocating convivial institutions used by autonomous learners, Illich is willing to risk the possibility that some learners will “fail” (by institutional standards; hardly ever by their own) in order to reopen the possibility of educational freedom. I return to the distinction between expectation and hope in the conclusion of this thesis.

1.3.4 Evaluation

Illich’s analysis of the defining characteristics of institutions that support free learning and of the ways in which they differ from unfree educational institutions is quite helpful for my thesis; indeed I analyze convivial and manipulative institutions in greater detail using the agency-within-structure model presented in the next chapter. However, Illich does neglect two crucial and closely related aspects of the project of self-directed learning: the effects of age and experience, and the need for exposure and guidance.

In Illich’s proposed system, learners are not differentiated on the basis of either age or experience — with the sole exception that a learner must demonstrate mastery of the skills needed to undertake a new course of learning. In some ways this is a much-needed corrective to the inflexible age-grading of traditional schooling. But we need not go so far as to assume that experience and age make *no* difference in a learner’s ability to choose and pursue self-determined learning goals. The effects of experience and age make themselves most manifest when we consider the importance of *exposure* and *guidance*.

I have already mentioned in my discussion of Neill and Holt the need to *expose* learners to various areas of study in order to enable them to choose what they want to learn. The point is the same here: without some minimal introduction to the wide variety of things one can learn and do, learners are restricted to choosing among the skills and subjects of which they are already aware. Surely this is just as limiting, though in a different way, as requiring learners to conform to some predetermined curriculum. One type of *guidance* is merely the provision of this exposure. Exposure-as-guidance means saying to a bored child, “Here are some possible learning goals. Do any of them appeal to you?” (The very thing Neill was so stubbornly unwilling to do in the case of Winifred.) It also means saying to a child who is already interested in one thing, “Since you find *this* so fascinating, you might like *that* as well.” In neither case would the suggestion turn into a demand that the learner pursue a particular path; in this way, exposure-as-guidance is fundamentally different from a mandatory curriculum.

But there is another type of guidance, perhaps even more important, that *does* begin to look a lot like a mandatory curriculum. Illich proposes a system of four “learning webs” to facilitate learners’ access to the four kinds of educational resources discussed above. One of those resources does include educational guides, to whom learners might turn for the exposure-as-guidance I have just discussed. Yet learners must also learn how to use these learning webs initially — *including the one that provides access to educational guides*. Presumably the operation of these convivial educational institutions would be kept as simple as possible — no more complex, say, than the phonebook or the postal address system. Yet even these paradigmatic examples of convivial institutions require some basic skills, such as knowing how to search for a last name or business listed alphabetically. Surely the learning webs Illich proposes would have similar basic skills as a prerequisite for effectively using them to pursue learning goals. This suggests that some minimal

mandatory instruction in those basic skills (whatever they turn out to be) is not at odds with the primary goal of self-directed learning, and may even be necessary to enable young or inexperienced learners to “tak[e] control of their own learning” (1970: 8).

In this thesis I cannot fully solve the questions of how to determine which learners need exposure and guidance, what sort of exposure and guidance is needed, and how and when that exposure and guidance is to be given to learners¹¹. A minimal amount of age-based instruction may not be the best method, but it is certainly the simplest and in many ways most practical. What is clear is that novice learners need to be exposed to the range of educational options and to be guided in selecting learning goals and accessing educational resources. Any theory of independent learning that fails to take account of these needs is incomplete. However, I do not think these weaknesses in Illich’s analysis of free, independent learning and its supporting institutions negate the value of his insights. Rather, one of my goals in this thesis is to build on his vision of free educational institutions in order to account for differences in age and experience and to make room for needed exposure and guidance.

1.4 Chapter summary

The libertarian educators I have surveyed in this chapter offer some valuable critiques of traditional education. They argue that children’s freedom to learn is diminished when they are forced to learn according to a predetermined curriculum and timeline, rather than exploring their own interests at their own pace. They show how traditional schools teach students to fear failure and to depend on teachers and schools, rather than taking control of their learning. All of these are legitimate concerns that need to be addressed in order to create free environments for learning.

¹¹ I do begin to address these questions, with respect to teaching reading, in Chapter Four.

However, the educational alternatives that Neill, Holt, and Illich suggest are lacking in some important respects. In different ways, they each set up an opposition between freedom and structure or constraint, between the individual and society. As a result, they do not recognize that many of children's interests (whether "educational" or not) are strongly influenced by the company they keep; both peers and adults can and do sway children toward or away from certain pursuits. In addition, the libertarian educators do not address the fact that educational freedom must be *developed*. Mature learners benefit from being allowed to learn without external pressures or requirements, but inexperienced learners (such as young children and non-readers) need both guidance and exposure *in order to become* free learners.

Thus, we need a more robust model of educational freedom than any of those offered by Neill, Holt, or Illich. This model must reconceptualize freedom and agency, structure and constraint, so that these concepts are not opposed to each other but rather mutually dependent. This will enable us to account for the ubiquity of social structures and influences in all learning environments – indeed, all human situations. At the same time, although structure and constraint are inescapable features of human life, some structures afford humans with a greater scope for agency, choice, and freedom than others do, as my discussions of Holt and Illich have already suggested. Accordingly, our new model must also provide a set of criteria for evaluating different educational structures (schools, classrooms, curricula, and so on) as *relatively* more freedom-enabling or *relatively* more freedom-hindering. My purpose in the next chapter is to develop just such a model.

Chapter Two: Agency and Structure

In this chapter I present an alternative conception of educational freedom, derived from what I call the agency-within-structure model of human social action (which is itself borrowed from practice theory). This modified view of educational freedom addresses some of the shortcomings of the libertarian educators identified in Chapter One; in addition, it enables us to account theoretically for certain aspects of their approaches to education that they did not analyze fully. The agency-within-structure model is not rooted in philosophical writings about freedom, however, or even in education theory; rather, it arose out of a key debate in the social sciences: the debate concerning the respective roles of and relationship between individual human actors and non-human societal forces.

Just as I contrasted libertarian education with liberal learning and progressive education, so too I must distinguish the agency-within-structure model from two other views of human social action. I group these under the broad headings of structuralism and voluntarism. Although practice theorists reject both structuralism and voluntarism, they define the new agency-within-structure model they propose in explicit opposition to these previous positions, thereby acknowledging their indebtedness to them. Therefore, before discussing the agency-within-structure model itself, it is helpful to have some background understanding of these earlier approaches to human interaction. They should be seen as both influences *on* the agency-within-structure model and contrasts *to* it.

After giving this background, I turn to the agency-within-structure model itself. I explain the concepts of agency and structure; I also give an account of how these relate to one another in human interactions. On the basis of the agency-within-structure model, I next suggest a method for evaluating educational structures as relatively more agency-enabling or agency-constraining, and I discuss two visions of relatively agency-enabling structures: Illich's (1970) convivial institutions and

Jenkins' (2009) participatory culture. Finally, I revisit Neill and Holt in light of the agency-within-structure model.

2.1 Background: Structuralism and voluntarism

I use “structuralism” as a broad term covering the social theories that dominated the social sciences for much of the twentieth century. Ortner (1997) lists the following specific examples: “British-American structural-functionalism, certain kind of deterministic/mechanical Marxism, French structuralism” (7). There is, of course, considerable variety among these different theoretical approaches to human social life. But for my purposes, the quarrels among them are not as important as what unites them: “a commitment to a view of society and history as machines or organisms, operating according to their own laws and logics, quite apart from the desires and intentions of social actors” (Ortner 1997: 7). According to structuralism, the deciding factors in human interactions are not the humans themselves, but the structural properties of the societies in which they live. These properties might include institutions and their official rules, but also norms of behavior that are implicitly understood but never explicitly stated and the systems of rewards and sanctions that uphold those norms.

In a structuralist view of human action, structural properties such as these exert an almost deterministic influence over the humans who are subject to them; humans blindly follow the dictates of their culture or society, often unaware of the *real* functions their actions accomplish. The Hopi rain dance is frequently cited as an example: “The Hopi believe the dance brings rain. We know that it doesn't, so [structuralists] look for some other explanation of why they act as they do... The rain dance has the function of ensuring social cohesion” (Giddens & Pierson 1998: 92). Thus, in order to understand human activity, structuralists disregard the reasons human actors give

for their own actions; instead, they pay attention only to the structural rules those humans are following (often unknowingly) and the societal functions those rules serve.

Structuralism is one extreme way of interpreting and explaining human action; voluntarism is another. Once again, I use “voluntarism” as a general term to designate several perspectives with significant differences. As examples, Giddens mentions “hermeneutic philosophy... ordinary language philosophy... [and] phenomenology” (1976: 23-24). As diverse as these are, they are unified in focusing attention precisely where structuralism does not: human actors, and the understandings they have of their own actions. In this view, “agents are free individuals” (Ortner 1997: 7), acting independently of all societal influences and constraints. Therefore, the nature of an act, its causes, and its consequences are ultimately determined by the individual human agent who performed that act. Where structuralism sought explanations in the structural properties of human interactions, “quite apart from the desires and intentions of social actors” (Ortner 1997: 7), voluntarism assumed that human actors were wholly capable of explaining their own actions, leaving no room for the “unacknowledged conditions [and] unintended consequences of action” (Giddens 1984: 282).

Although structuralists and voluntarists were locked in debate for much of the twentieth century, I have not portrayed structuralism and voluntarism as irreconcilably opposed theories of social action. Rather, I find it more helpful to see these positions as the two extremes of a spectrum. If this is accurate, more nuanced approaches could combine the insights of both structuralism and voluntarism while avoiding the limitations of either. In the next section, I argue that the agency-within-structure model of practice theorists such as Ortner and Giddens is exactly such a middle way. But first, I want to mention the parallels between two particular approaches to education and structuralism and voluntarism. This correspondence should not be surprising, since, as Giddens

shows, the theories and “discoveries” of social scientists can always be reincorporated into the deliberate actions of human agents (1984: 284; see also 300)¹².

Structuralism parallels the traditional approach to education so criticized by the libertarian educators. In traditional education, the focus is on the structure of the school system itself, including both explicit and implicit rules. The ability of individual students to act of themselves in securing (or avoiding) an education is both downplayed in theory and curtailed in practice. The ideal student, in this approach, conforms as closely as possible to the view of the human actor put forward by structuralism: her education is wholly determined by the school rules of behavior and curriculum, which she blindly follows. She neither actively appropriates those rules for herself nor works to change them.

On the other side, the free agent of voluntarism clearly corresponds to the ideal of libertarian education. Voluntarism holds that humans are able to act independently of structures, social influences, and constraints – the very things from which the libertarian educators sought to free learners. The voluntarist picture of human activity as determined only by the individual human actor would be very appealing to Neill and Holt. The libertarian educators advocate removing all rules about education in order to set learners free to learn as they see fit, and voluntarism supports this project by asserting that human action in the absence of rules is in fact possible.

Just as structuralism and voluntarism could be put into practice by traditional and libertarian educators, respectively, so too the agency-within-structure model has its applications for

¹² Note that I am not suggesting that the following approaches to education were explicitly or directly drawn from either structuralism or voluntarism. I merely wish to point out that it makes sense that different social theories should have distinct applications to the field of education, regardless of how distant or unconscious the influence may be.

education. But before I discuss those applications, I first explain the new model of social action that grew out of the debate between structuralism and voluntarism.

2.2 The agency-within-structure model

The agency-within-structure model presented here is derived primarily from Giddens (1984), supported by Ortner (1997). Both Giddens and Ortner are part of a broader, cross-disciplinary intellectual movement called practice theory. Ortner explains the distinctives of this approach:

Within a practice framework, there is an insistence, as in earlier structural-determinist models, that human action is constrained by the given social and cultural order (often condensed in the term ‘structure’); but there is also an insistence that human action *makes* ‘structure’ – reproduces or transforms it, or both. (Ortner 1997: 2, emphasis original)

I draw more extensively on Giddens’ theoretical work than on Ortner’s because, although Ortner clearly articulates the way practice theory differs from structuralism and voluntarism, Giddens analyzes more carefully the nature of agency and structure, according to practice theory, and the relationship between them. In addition, I find Giddens’ conception of power more compelling than Ortner’s, as I discuss below.

For my purposes, the principle tasks of the agency-within-structure model are to give a conception of both ‘agency’ and ‘structure’, and to offer some non-reductive explanation of how they relate to one another.

2.2.1 Agency

Agency is the capability of individuals to do things, rather than to have things done to them – to act of themselves in the world. “Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently. Whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened” (Giddens 1984: 9). Agency must not be confused with intentionality, because “I am the author of

many things I do not intend to do, and may not want to bring about, but none the less *do*" (9, emphasis original). Neither do *all* the consequences of an action fall under agency:

Unintended *doings* can be separated conceptually from unintended *consequences* of doings... The consequences of what actors do, intentionally or unintentionally, are events which would have not happened if that actor had behaved differently, but which are not within the scope of the agent's power to have brought about (regardless of what the agent's intentions were). (11, emphasis added)

Thus, agency refers neither to what an agent *desires* to bring about, nor to what she *contributes to* bringing about, but to what she *actually brings about*; as Giddens summarizes, "[a]gency refers to doing" (10).

Two key components of agency are *knowledgeability* and *power*. Knowledgeability refers to "[e]verything which actors know (believe) about the circumstances of their action and that of others, drawn upon in the production and reproduction of that action, including tacit as well as discursively available knowledge" (Giddens 1984: 375). In order to differentiate the agency-within-structure model from structuralist approaches, Giddens repeatedly emphasizes this point: "All human beings are knowledgeable agents. That is to say, all social actors know a great deal about the conditions and consequences of what they do in their day-to-day lives" (281). The agent of the agency-within-structure model is not blindly obeying the dictates of social forces (as in structuralism), but is to a large extent knowledgeable of what she is doing, and why.

Two caveats must be made to this account of knowledgeability, in order to guard against a naïve faith in agents' own awareness of their actions (characteristic of voluntarism). First, "[s]uch knowledge is not wholly propositional in character" (Giddens 1984: 281), meaning that agents cannot always explain what they do discursively (in words). Rather, much of their knowledge is practical: it is found in the ability to implicitly "read" the contexts of their activities and to "go on"

in the Wittgensteinian sense (26). However, despite this important difference between discursive and practical social knowledge, Giddens is careful to explain that,

I do not intend the distinction between discursive and practical consciousness to be a rigid and impermeable one. On the contrary, the division between the two can be altered by many aspects of the agent's socialization and learning experiences. Between discursive and practical consciousness there is no bar [as there is between discursive consciousness and the unconscious]; there are only the differences between *what can be said* and *what is characteristically only done*. (7, emphasis added)

Because most of our understanding of how to act in social settings is practical, not discursive, we cannot assume that children or anyone else can give an explicit account of everything they are capable of doing (and doing knowledgeably). The implications of this will become clearer in a later section, when I discuss examples of knowledgeable action in the writings of the libertarian educators. At the same time, however, practical consciousness *can* be transformed into discursive awareness. And so we must remain open to the possibility that this transformation might happen in the course of an individual's education, even that the transformation of practical into discursive consciousness *might* be one of the goals of education.

In order to understand how knowledgeability enters into human agency, we must not only distinguish between practical and discursive consciousness; we must also recognize the limits of knowledgeability: "[t]he knowledgeability of human actors is always bounded on the one hand by the unconscious and on the other by unacknowledged conditions/unintended consequences of action" (Giddens 1984: 282). By acknowledging these limits, the agency-within-structure model parts ways with voluntarism. Yet by affirming that agents *actively* reproduce or transform social structures, even if they are not aware of doing so and do not intend to do so, the agency-within-structure model differs also from structuralism. The role of agents' knowledgeability in this model avoids the errors of *both* extremes.

In addition to knowledgeability, agency is intimately related to power. Giddens expresses the relationship between the two as follows:

To be able to 'act otherwise' means being able to intervene in the world, or to refrain from such intervention, with the effect of influencing a specific process or state of affairs. This presumes that to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically, in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers, including that of influencing those deployed by others. Action depends upon the capability of the individual to 'make a difference' to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of events. (1984: 14)

Thus, for Giddens, power is simply the ability to act in the world. If an individual has agency, she also has power, and vice versa. This applies even to individuals who are typically perceived as being "subordinate" or even "oppressed":

We should not conceive of the structures of domination built into social institutions as in some way grinding out 'docile bodies' who behave like the automata suggested by objectivist social science... [A]ll forms of dependence offer some resources whereby those who are subordinate can influence the activities of their superiors. (16)

In this view, no human, group of humans, or social structure is able to render another human completely powerless. Importantly, even the traditional approach to education so criticized by the libertarian educators cannot wholly destroy learners' agency and power.

Ortner criticizes Giddens' conception of power, arguing that he "often seems detached from the concerns of feminist, minority, postcolonial, and subaltern theorists" (1997: 5). Although there is some truth to this, it seems unfair to Giddens, for the following reasons. First, Giddens does recognize the importance of paying attention to situations in which an individual has little or no power:

An agent ceases to be such if he or she loses the capability to 'make a difference', that is, to exercise some sort of power. Many interesting cases for social analysis centre upon the margins of what can count as action — where the power of the individual is confined by a range of specifiable circumstances. (1984: 14-15)

At the same time, he also reaffirms (*against* structuralism) a qualitative difference between such cases of minimal power and cases that are wholly involuntary:

But it is of the first importance to recognize that *circumstances of social constraint in which individuals 'have no choice' are not to be equated with the dissolution of action as such*. To 'have no choice' does not mean that action has been replaced by reaction (in the way in which a person blinks when a rapid movement is made near the eyes). This might appear so obvious as not to need saying. But some very prominent schools of social theory, associated mainly with objectivism and with 'structural sociology', have not acknowledged the distinction. They have supposed that constraints operate like forces of nature, as if to 'have no choice' were equivalent to being driven irresistibly and uncomprehendingly by mechanical pressures. (Giddens 1984: 15, emphasis added)

Physical necessity such as the limitations and automatic reactions of the human body may *control* human action (or rather, as Giddens says, replace action with reaction). In contrast, social constraints (including educational ones) never do more than *influence* action. Though that influence may be very strong indeed, human actors still retain control.

By *both* acknowledging that power relations can be significantly asymmetrical *and* reasserting that all humans have at least some power either to reproduce the existing social order or (in large or small ways) to change it, Giddens offers a powerful theoretical basis for the work of social scientists such as Ortner (e.g., 1997: 16-19) who are concerned with understanding the agency and actions of oppressed or marginalized individuals and groups. Moreover, the agency-within-structure model that Giddens develops *does* suggest a way to critique different social structures with respect to the scope for agency available to their participants; I elaborate on this point in the next full section.

2.2.2 Structure

Despite its emphasis on what individual humans do, the agency-within-structure model does not conceive of human actors as autonomous, independent of or uninfluenced by the social contexts in

which they act. Agency is never free-floating, but is always “embedded” (Ortner 1997: 13) in structure. Giddens defines structure as follows:

Rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Structure exists only as memory traces, the organic basis of human knowledgeability, and as instantiated in action... Structure thus refers, in social analysis, to the structuring properties allowing the ‘binding’ of time-space in social systems, the properties which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them ‘systemic’ form. (1984: 377, 17, emphasis added)

He is careful to distinguish this conception of structure from that favored by structuralist social theorists, in which “‘structure’... appears as ‘external’ to human action, as a source of constraint on the free initiative of the independently constituted subject” (16). Structure is not an independent force that influences or even determines human behavior; rather, human action itself constantly reproduces or alters structure. At the same time, structure makes human acts what they are. Giddens explains that this happens through “the constitution of *meaning*, and... the *sanctioning* of modes of social conduct” (18, emphasis original). The making of meaning and of sanctions are “two aspects of rules” (20).

Rules are “techniques or generalizable procedures applied to the enactment/reproduction of social practices” (1984: 21). Structural rules correspond to the knowledgeability of agents. Thus, they *may* be explicitly stated, but are far more likely to be tacitly understood. In fact, Giddens distinguishes sharply between tacit and discursive rules:

Most of the rules implicated in the production and reproduction of social practices are only tacitly grasped by actors: they know how to ‘go on’. The discursive formulation of a rule is already an interpretation of it, and... may in and of itself alter the form of its application. (22-23, emphasis original)

The inability of human agents to state the rules by which they act neither negates their knowledgeability about their actions nor indicates that they merely follow those rules blindly or automatically. On the contrary, to state the rule is to put an interpretation on it, and thereby to

change it. “Interpretations of activity” must not be confused with “procedures of action” (21); it is the latter that Giddens identifies as rules. Just as discursive consciousness is distinct from practical consciousness (though the division between them is fuzzy and permeable), so too verbally expressing a rule is not the same as acting in accordance with it.

Just as structural rules correspond to agents’ knowledgeability, so structural resources correspond to agents’ power. Resources are “the modes whereby transformative relations are actually incorporated into the production and reproduction of social practices” (Giddens 1984: 18).

Giddens identifies two kinds of resources:

Allocative resources refer to capabilities — or, more accurately, to forms of transformative capability — generating command over objects, goods, or material phenomena. Authoritative resources refer to types of transformative capacity generating command over persons or actors. (33)

He does not ignore the fact that individuals may have more or less command over things and people, and that these inequalities affect their abilities to act in the world. But he emphasizes that resources are not free-floating, pre-existing entities; they only become resources as agents put them to use in social practices. To give just one example, my possession of certain pieces of paper only gives me the power to purchase goods and services within the context of practices that recognize those pieces of paper as money, and of the legal and financial institutions such practices give rise to. Absent these institutions and the more widespread and mundane actions of individuals on which they depend, the resource of paper money is not only *powerless* but also *meaningless*.

2.2.3 Agency-within-structure

Now that the concepts of ‘agency’ and ‘structure’ have been explained, it should also become clear how they relate to one another. Structure has no existence except as agents (implicitly) believe certain things about their world and act in accordance with those beliefs; on the other hand, agents depend on structure in order to do things in the world. It must be emphasized that *neither*

structure *nor* agency is wholly determinate. “Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling” (Giddens 1984: 25). And “[agents’ making of their world] may turn out to produce the same old social and cultural thing – ‘reproduction.’ Or it may turn out to produce something new, although not necessarily what the actors intended” (Ortner 1997: 1). However, although both agency and structure have an *indeterminate* character, they are not *independent* of each other: in the agency-within-structure model, they are seen as “of equivalent interest and importance, aspects of a duality rather than a mutually exclusive dualism” (Giddens 1984: 30). Ortner helpfully summarizes:

Writing [and thinking] in terms of the old binaries – structure/event, structure/agency, habitus/practice – is, I think, a dead end. The challenge is to picture indissoluble formations of structurally embedded agency and intention-filled structures, to recognize the ways in which the subject is part of larger social and cultural webs, and in which social and cultural “systems” are predicated upon human desires and projects. (Ortner 1997: 12)

The agency-within-structure model is illustrated by Figure 2.1.

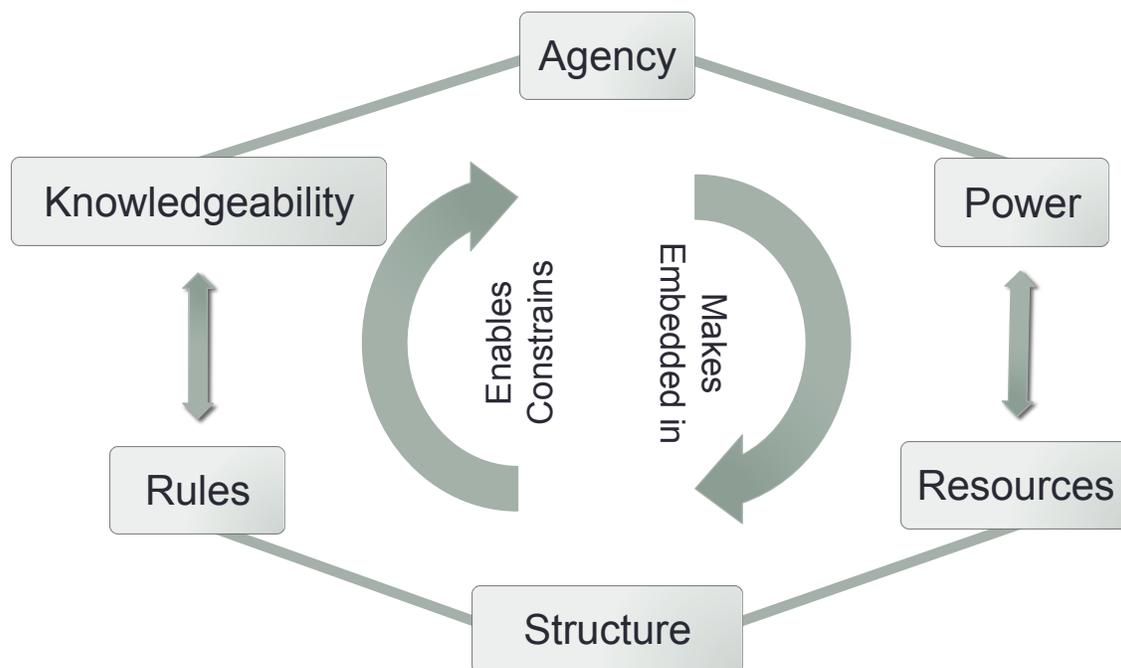


Figure 2.1 The agency-within-structure model

The concept uniting “structurally embedded agency” and “intention-filled structures” is ‘practical consciousness’, or “know[ing] how to ‘go on’” (Giddens 1984: 22-23). In Giddens’ words, practical consciousness is “[w]hat actors know (believe) about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action, but cannot express discursively” (375). This knowledge, composed of the actors’ understandings of the workings of rules and resources within their social worlds, is what both enables and constrains their actions; at the same time, by acting on their knowledge about their social worlds, actors make those worlds, either reproducing them as they were or recreating them in different ways.

So the agency-within-structure model claims that *both* agency *and* structure (as they are understood in the model) are always present in human social action. All human activities, including teaching and learning, occur in a given context — both the immediate conditions of interaction and the larger “givens” of language, culture, and so on. But that context is only constituted as such by the beliefs and behaviors of the human actors involved, and is constantly subject to revision and redefinition. Furthermore, the given rules and resources not only set limits on the scope of human action; they also make it possible for that action to occur. Even when agents remake their social worlds, they do so by means of those very same social worlds. Social structures are like train tracks: Trains have to go wherever the tracks go, but the tracks make it possible for trains to go anywhere in the first place. So train tracks enable the movement of the train *by* constraining it. Likewise, by constraining human action, structures enable agents to act at all.

Because we can never do away with either structure or agency, both structure and agency must be present in both traditional and libertarian approaches to education. Traditional education does require agency on the part of both students and teachers, though that agency is not accorded official recognition and support. And libertarian education does require structure, and even

constraint, in order to make action and learning possible. Nevertheless, although traditional and libertarian approaches to education share agency-within-structure, the differences between them are still significant. In other words, we can still evaluate different structures¹³ – including different approaches to education – as *relatively* more agency-enabling or agency-constraining. In the next section I discuss that evaluation.

2.3 Evaluating structures

A key principle of the agency-within-structure model is that all structures both constrain and enable human action. At the same time, however, some structures are more “agency-friendly” than others; that is, some conditions of interaction lean toward the side of enabling agency, while others lean toward constraining it. Accordingly, we can judge different structures, such as institutions of education, with respect to their relationship to human agency¹⁴. Agency-friendly structures are *particularly* important for education, because agency must be developed: children learn how to exercise their agency through participation in educational structures that support their growing abilities to control their own learning.

Using the agency-within-structure model, we can redefine freedom, not as the simple absence of constraints (and thus something that one either does or does not have), but as the relative scope for action provided by one’s social contexts¹⁵. We could think of this in terms of breadth and depth of agency: the range of different things one is able to do and how meaningful or

¹³ Giddens distinguishes ‘structure’ from ‘structures,’ defining the latter as “[r]ule-resource *sets*, implicated in the *institutional* articulation of social systems” (1984: 377, emphasis added). It seems fair to say that the different educational set-ups critiqued and proposed by the libertarian educators would be considered structures in this sense; thus, it is these types of structures that I seek to develop a method of evaluating.

¹⁴ To be sure, there may be many other good criteria for evaluating educational institutions. My focus here is on the criterion of students’ agency, in order to both critique and improve libertarian educational theory.

¹⁵ This definition is not intended to cover every dimension of the concept of ‘freedom,’ but only those aspects of freedom that seem most essential to libertarian education.

significant one perceives those things to be. Or, in keeping with the emphasis on freedom as a property of structures as well as of agents, we might look at the flexibility of rules and access to resources: who decides the rules, who is able to change them, and how easily; who has certain resources, how easily they are obtained, and how easily they change hands. Any of these questions might give us some indication of how free an educational institution (or any other context of human action) is.

Undergirding such inquiries is the idea that it is not primarily the *amount* of constraint that matters, but rather its *nature*; in other words, the difference between free and unfree structures is qualitative, not quantitative. Free structures are those that enable more than they constrain, and that constrain only in order to enable; unfree structures do the opposite: they constrain more than they enable, and they enable only in order to further constrain. This method of evaluating structures presents a more nuanced and productive account of the relationship between freedom and constraint than does the method of the libertarian educators.

In this section, I illustrate this modified definition of freedom with two conceptions of free structures. The first, which I have already discussed in the first chapter, is Illich's convivial institutions; the second is Jenkins' (2009) participatory culture.

2.3.1 Convivial institutions

Illich distinguishes between convivial and manipulative institutions on the basis of whether they “develop... independence and learning [rather than] bureaucracy and teaching” and “support personal growth rather than addiction” (1970: 77, 53). Recall from Chapter One that convivial institutions “exist to be used” (55), and so produce only as much (or as little) goods and services as their users require; manipulative institutions, in contrast, exist to produce something, and so exert pressure on individuals to consume what they have produced. The pressure exerted by

manipulative institutions might come via direct advertisement, but it might also take the form of cultural redefinition of needs and social roles. For example, the effect of widespread mandatory schooling is to redefine the universal need to learn as a need for teaching (specifically, a need to be taught a pre-determined curriculum by officially certified teachers), and to recategorize young people as ‘students’ who need to be taught. In this way, people are persuaded to purchase the service of schooling (and the goods of textbooks, standardized tests, diplomas, and so on).

Using the agency-within-structure model developed in the previous section, we can analyze both convivial and manipulative institutions in terms of *rules* and *resources*. But the rules and resources that compose them are qualitatively different. To begin with rules, Illich notes that,

The rules which govern institutions for use have mainly the purpose of avoiding abuses which would frustrate their general accessibility... The regulation of convivial institutions sets limits to their use; as one moves from the convivial to the manipulative end of the spectrum, the rules progressively call for unwilling consumption or participation. (1970: 55)

It is not the case that convivial institutions do not constrain action; if they did not, they would not be structures at all. However, they only limit action where one person’s (mis)use would jeopardize the continued use of the institution by themselves and others: Illich gives the example of rules against obstructing sidewalks (55). In contrast, the rules of manipulative institutions compel individuals to participate in those institutions (such as compulsory schooling). Although they still enable agency (just as convivial institutions still constrain it), they only enable actions that meet the “needs” of the institutions themselves, not of their users.

We can also analyze the resources of these structures. Convivial and manipulative institutions may involve similar kinds of resources, such as “service institutions” (1970: 55). However, the two types of institutions put individuals in qualitatively different relationships to the resources they provide. If a service institution is convivial, “the service is amplified opportunity

within formally defined limits, while the client remains a free agent” (55); thus, the resources of convivial institutions are made available to the individual, but she is free to choose how and even whether to use those resources. Manipulative service institutions, on the other hand, “tend to be highly complex and costly production processes in which much of the elaboration and expense is concerned with convincing consumers that they cannot live without the product or the treatment offered by the institution” (55). They do not allow the individual to choose whether or not to use the institution; rather, they “both invite compulsively repetitive use and frustrate alternative ways of achieving similar results” (56). Once again, both types of institutions both enable and constrain. But in the case of manipulative institutions, the institution itself determines what is enabled; in the case of convivial institutions, the individual retains the choice of how (and even whether) to use the resources provided and follow the rules set down. Ultimately, these two types of institutions relate differently to individuals’ participation: convivial institutions invite and allow participation, while manipulative institutions require and compel it.

2.3.2 Participatory culture

Illich is concerned with ensuring that alternative ways of participating remain viable – along with the possibility of not participating altogether. Another theorist, Henry Jenkins, looks instead at the qualities of structures that make participation not only possible but also desirable. Jenkins gives the following five characteristics of what he calls “participatory culture”:

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others
3. Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Members who believe that their contributions matter
5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created) (Jenkins 2009: 5-6)

Few participatory cultures would formalize these characteristics in the manner of the laws about sidewalk use or compulsory school attendance that constitute Illich's convivial and manipulative institutions. But, as Giddens explained, tacit, informal structural properties are just as important as official laws and regulations — in fact, they may be even more effective at constraining and enabling human action, precisely because they are *not* discursively stated. Insofar as the members of a participatory culture know or believe the above characteristics to be true of that culture and make use of them as rules and resources to do things in that culture, the participatory culture is structured by those characteristics.

Jenkins' conception of participatory culture has much in common with Illich's convivial institutions. Participation is available, but never mandatory. "In such a world, many will only dabble, some will dig deeper, and still others will master the skills the community values most. The community itself, however, provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation" (2009: 6). Jenkins contrasts participatory cultures with "formal educational systems" (11), a paradigmatic example of manipulative institutions: "[F]ormal education is often conservative... static... institutional... [and] bureaucratic and increasingly national in scope" while "the informal learning within popular [i.e., participatory] culture is often experimental... innovative... provisional... [and] ad hoc and localized." Jenkins summarizes these differences in a way that could have come straight from Illich's discussion of convivial and manipulative institutions: "We can move in and out of informal learning communities if they fail to meet our needs; we enjoy no such mobility in our relations to formal education."

Clearly, then, optional participation or involvement is a key quality of both convivial institutions and participatory culture. Yet Jenkins' five characteristics of participatory culture go further; in the terms I used in Chapter One, he addresses both freedom *from* coerced

participation and freedom *to* participate as one desires. The five characteristics listed above — openness, support, mentorship, significance, and social connection — are the rules and resources that, according to Jenkins, encourage participation in a community. As structural rules and resources, each characteristic both enables participation (action) *and* constrains it. Yet the constraints of participatory culture are the very means by which it enables meaningful, open-ended social interaction.

1. “Relatively low barriers” enable anyone to join in who wants to, while also constraining the participants to participate in ways that do not prevent others from doing so.
2. “Support for... sharing creations with others” entails channels for (informal) publication or distribution, channels that (like train tracks) both allow creative expressions to move among community members *and* dictate or greatly influence the method of sharing.
3. “Informal mentorship” enables newcomers to grow in learning and more experienced members to feel a sense of expertise as they share their knowledge and skills; at the same time, such mentorship depends on shared expectations that more experienced members will take the time to help newer participants learn and improve and that novices will at the very least listen respectfully when experts offer advice or criticism.
4. In order to have “members who believe that their contributions matter,” the community must also have members who believe *others’* contributions matter.
5. To “care what other people think” clearly both enables *and* constrains individuals to participate in ways that the community finds significant.

If an individual desires strongly enough to participate in a particular community, she is unlikely to feel these constraints as particularly cumbersome. But the constraints are there, even if they are not felt as such. That does not mean participatory cultures would be somehow better or freer if we could find some way to remove such constraints; on the contrary, without such constraining-and-enabling structures, it would be impossible for humans to participate in participatory cultures at all. By defining shared expectations or *rules* and *resources* for interaction in the community, the constraints of participatory culture actually *enable* participation.

I take Jenkins' description of participatory culture as a starting point, but I make two modifications for the purposes of this thesis. First, although Jenkins considers participatory culture to be mostly about artistic or creative expression and media creation, I use the concept of participatory culture more broadly, to encompass all social learning communities that share the five characteristics discussed above. In particular, I see participation as including both media *production* and media *comprehension* (which is itself the production of meaning on the part of the audience, even if it does not produce a new media object [see Hall 1980/1973]). Second, Jenkins focuses to a considerable extent on participatory cultures that depend on new technologies such as cell phones and the Internet. Once again, I extend the concept to include those communities that use older technologies such as pencil and paper or that operate without any technological intermediaries. To be sure, new technologies offer *some* new possibilities for participation; but the use of new technologies is not in and of itself a key characteristic of a participatory culture, as Jenkins himself recognizes (2009: 7-8). The relevance of both modifications will become clearer in Chapter Three, where I define reading, and in Chapter Four, where I base my vision of a libertarian approach to teaching reading in part on Jenkins' characterization of participatory culture.

Illich's distinction between convivial and manipulative institutions developed out of his concern over the worldwide expansion of compulsory, age-graded schooling, especially its effects on the poorest countries, communities, and individuals. Jenkins' account of participatory culture, in contrast, is rooted in the new technologies and media of first-world, twenty-first century societies. Illich insists that free structures allow for alternative participation and especially non-participation, while Jenkins draws our attention to the qualities that encourage people to *want* to participate in a community. Together, their conceptions of convivial institutions and participatory cultures illustrate that structures constraints are not opposed to freedom but are in fact necessary for it.

2.4 Agency and structure in the libertarian educators

I now revisit the libertarian educators discussed in Chapter One in light of the agency-within-structure model. I have already discussed Illich's vision of convivial institutions, so in this section I focus on Neill and Holt. Neill, more so than either Holt or Illich, advocated removing all structures and constraints from education. Although his ideal of human actors corresponds more closely to the free agents of voluntarism, he commits the structuralist fallacy of equating constraint and structure. So in this section I discuss two examples of structure and constraint at Summerhill: self-government and the General Meeting, and Neill's interaction with Winifred. In the latter case, I argue that it was the *lack* of structure that was in fact constraining; I then give further examples from Holt of a lack of structure leading to constrained action and of educational structures that, like convivial institutions and participatory cultures, enable students to exercise greater control over their own learning.

The most obvious example of structure at Summerhill was the school's self-government, embodied in the weekly General Meeting. Giddens argues that all structures only exist as they are remembered and enacted by human agents. This was particularly transparent in the case of

Summerhill's self-government, because Neill was willing on multiple occasions to let the children do away with that structure (1992: 30-31, 52-53). Further evidence that the General Meeting was a structure in Giddens' sense comes from the fact that it provided rules and resources for social action. The *resources* of the General Meeting included a time and place for the entire community to come together, mechanisms for raising and addressing grievances or other matters of communal concern, and one vote per person. The *rules* of the General Meeting were both explicit (e.g., each person gets exactly one vote, regardless of age or status) and implicit (e.g., it is better to persuade others by reasonable arguments than by force or authority). These rules sanctioned certain types of behavior and not others (e.g., bringing up a bully at the meeting was a more accepted way of dealing with him than exacting personal vengeance); they also constituted the meanings of certain acts (e.g., the act of voting has no meaning if there is no meeting in which to vote, and the act of breaking someone else's private property has no meaning if there is no government to back it up [see Neill 1992: 31]).

Clearly, self-government and the General Meeting were enabling; they allowed for laws to be made, cases heard, and punishments for deviant behavior to be decided by the community itself. Less clearly, but just as certainly, this structure was also constraining. If one wanted to bring an issue before the community, one had to do it at the time and place of the General Meeting, not some other time. This very *constraint* was what *enabled* all members of the community to come together and participate in decision-making. In addition, as Neill acknowledged, a dissenting minority is constrained to accept the majority decision (1992: 21). It is difficult to see how this constraint is also enabling, but the rule of the majority is inherent in the very nature of democracy. To do away with self-government in the interest of minority rights would be even more constraining, as the children learned during the few occasions of total anarchy.

A second example illustrates even more vividly the idea that lack of constraint can be very constraining indeed. Recall from Chapter One the story of Winifred, who asked Neill to “teach her something.” When she did not know what she wanted to learn, Neill refused to offer any guidance or suggestions at all. So she chose to study for the university entrance exams, not because she found the subjects interesting, but because she considered them better than the boredom she felt when she had nothing to study. As Neill tells it, this is a laudable example of the lack of constraint at Summerhill. Winifred was not required to take certain subjects, as she would have been at another school; in fact, she was not even constrained by the slightest *suggestion* from Neill of a possible course of action. But I argue that she was effectively limited to the choices she perceived to be available to her at Summerhill: boredom, or the university entrance subjects. Although Neill’s refusal to guide her in discovering what she wanted to learn might appear to increase her freedom, in reality it constrained her to choose from the subjects of which she already had some awareness. A few thoughtful suggestions from Neill, while in one sense constraining her (by influencing her decision), would have also enabled her to choose from a wider range of possibilities than a thirteen-year-old could be expected to know about on her own.

Just as the institutions of Summerhill’s self-government (such as the General Meeting) had no existence external to the actions of the community members but were enacted by them, reproduced or altered by the choices of each generation of children, so too in this instance a structural property of Summerhill (i.e., that students had to decide for themselves what they wanted to learn, with no guidance from the adults around them) was enacted by the individual agents Neill and Winifred. In the case of Neill, he deliberately and knowingly chose not to suggest anything for Winifred to learn; in fact, by making this decision of non-intervention repeatedly with respect to student after student, Neill actively *produced* the structural property that Summerhill

offered students no guidance. Winifred's participation in producing that structural property was probably less intentional than Neill's: if she had known how he would respond to her request, she would have been unlikely to come to him in the first place. But by requesting Neill's guidance, rather than pursuing some course of learning without consulting him, she acted on her implicit, practical knowledge (most likely learned at her previous school) that adults are generally in charge of children's learning, both to offer direction and to sanction certain pursuits and not others. Her action was no less deliberate and knowledgeable than Neill's, even if its consequence (triggering Neill's refusal to offer guidance) was less intentional.

This point — that Winifred was acting deliberately and knowledgeably within the context of what she knew — is key to my whole argument regarding agency and structure. In coming to Neill, Winifred was *already displaying* her agency in seeking out an education for herself. Neill would not have harmed her agency by offering guidance; on the contrary, by refusing to give the help she asked for, he further restricted her ability to act. As Winifred saw the situation, she had two educational options: she could either get Neill's help in finding something interesting to learn, or pursue the only learning possibility she herself knew about (the university entrance subjects), which she admitted "did not interest her much" (1992: 126). Of these options, she preferred the former; thus, when Neill refused, he closed off the educational choice she herself had made. To be sure, Winifred's agency was already curtailed by her limited knowledge about what and how she could learn — but that is precisely why she needed guidance from Neill. Such guidance would have extended, not restricted, her agency by offering her an even wider range of options from which to choose¹⁶.

¹⁶ The analysis in this paragraph applies equally to all 'dependent learners' as described by Illich (1970) and discussed in Chapter One, insofar as they deliberately choose — on the basis of their

Holt discusses numerous examples of environments where action can be restricted by too *little* structure. For instance, if students in an open classroom do not put things away after they finish using them, eventually nobody can find the things they want to use (1972: 28-30). Even worse if there is nothing for them to use or do in the first place (86)! Holt tries to explain why so many students in free schools (like Winifred) seem unhappy and bored. He observes that, before they came to a free school,

Their very powerful and preemptive need was to be free of the constant pressure of adults, rules, regulations, to be left alone, to not be harassed all the time about hair, clothes, homework, exams, college. Now this need is satisfied. But people, particularly young people in their teens, at the peak of their energies, need things to do. In many free schools, small and broke, there's not much to do... They need a society to grow in and into, a society that makes some sense, has reasonable purposes, that they can trust and respect. (47)

Such a society will hardly be free of structures and constraints. But in the absence of such structures and the meaningful way of life they cultivate, Holt suggests, students feel not more but less free. By growing up in a human society and learning its rules and resources, children increasingly exercise their agency as social beings.

In Chapter One I discussed how Holt gave his fifth graders “read or work periods” (1972: 87-89). These times had their constraining aspects: the children had to stay in the classroom, they could not play music during a quiet free period, and they could only have a free period if their teacher, Holt, approved it. More subtly, one or two students could not decide to have a “normal” lesson while the rest of the class had a free period! But this structure provided more legitimate space for the students’ agency than the traditional classroom, in which the teacher attempts to control all the students’ activities at all times. Within the bounds of the free period they could choose what they wanted to do (or, in the case of a “straight read or work period” [88], what they

limited awareness of or access to opportunities for self-teaching – to learn through official schools and teachers.

wanted to read or work on). More significantly, the children learned that they could request such a free period themselves – and Holt notes that they did so “not just to have a chance to do nothing, but because there was something they wanted to do” (88). They were learning that there *were* things they wanted to do, and that they needed a specific type of environment in which to do them: “Sometimes they would ask for a straight read or work period, or a quiet free period” (88). The structure of these different free periods and of the classroom as a whole, defined initially by Holt but repeatedly reproduced by him *and* the students, enabled them to request and secure the kind of environment that fit what they wanted to do at the time. In the process, they gained valuable experience in exercising their agency with respect to their own learning.

To be sure, Holt does not imply that these free periods were perfect. At the time he taught that class, he did not have very many “materials and projects” (1972: 87) for the students to work with. But, just as with Jenkins’ participatory culture, the way to improve Holt’s classroom would not have been to make it *less* structured, but rather to introduce structures that would give the students more ways to participate in the classroom society. What the students needed was not *fewer* constraints but rather *more* choices, *more* things to do, *more* ways to act. The structures that provide such choices and opportunities for action are agency-enabling, even though they are at the same time constraining.

2.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have argued for replacing the opposition between freedom and coercion with a “duality” (Giddens 1984: 30) of agency and structure. The agency-within-structure model that I present here developed out of the debate between structuralism and voluntarism, two social theories that parallel traditional and libertarian approaches to education, respectively. Following practice theorists Giddens (1984) and Ortner (1997), I conceive of ‘agency’ as individuals’ ability to

act knowledgeably in their social worlds and ‘structure’ as the rules and resources that make such action possible. The agency-within-structure model holds that both agency and structure are always present in every human interaction, including education. So agency is not wholly absent from traditional education — despite the libertarian educators’ critiques; likewise, libertarian education is not wholly unstructured, or even free of constraints — despite the libertarian educators’ claims. Furthermore, agency and structure are fundamentally interwoven: agency reproduces or changes structure, and structure always both constrains and enables agency.

Thus, the agency-within-structure model allows us to reconceptualize freedom in a way that is particularly useful for thinking about *educational* freedom. The redefinition of freedom that I proposed is “the relative scope for action provided by one’s social contexts.” This definition indicates that it is not the *quantity* of structure that determines how much freedom one has, but rather its *quality* — that is, whether it is relatively more agency-enabling or more agency-constraining. This provides a criterion for evaluating different structures, including educational contexts, on the basis of the scope they offer for individual agency. To illustrate, I discussed two visions of relatively agency-enabling structures: Illich’s ‘convivial institutions’ and Jenkins’ ‘participatory culture.’ I also used the agency-within-structure model to reconsider the writings of Neill and Holt; I gave further examples of agency-enabling structures from their work, and demonstrated that — particularly in the case of young children whose knowledge of the world is inherently limited — an apparent *lack* of constraint can actually be *very* constraining.

If the conception of freedom developed in this chapter is correct, then a truly libertarian education is *not* one that has as few rules and requirements as possible. Rather, it *does* have structures — including formal, explicit rules as well as unstated ones — but those structures must enable children to exercise their agency, to grow in their abilities to act in their social worlds. In

particular, libertarian educators must deliberately institute structures and even constraints that help children learn to educate themselves, rather than to passively receive education from someone else. In the next two chapters, I apply this reasoning to the specific case of learning to read. First, in Chapter Three, I argue that the requirement that all children learn to read, though on the surface a constraint, is in fact necessary to enable all children to become agents of their own learning. Then, in Chapter Four, I suggest some agency-enabling ways we might structure the educational contexts in which children learn to read.

Chapter Three: The Necessity of Learning to Read

In this chapter I discuss the educational importance of reading. I argue that a libertarian educational theory cannot consider reading to be as optional as every other area of learning without significantly compromising students' abilities to "tak[e] control of their own learning" (Illich 1970: 8), a central goal of libertarian educational theory itself. In order to establish the need for this argument, I first review the positions held by Neill, Illich, and Holt on reading. I then seek to provide a definition of reading that situates it within the agency-within-structure model of human social action. Once I have done so, I present my own arguments that the ability to read is necessary for the very possibility of self-education in our society. I end the chapter by responding to objections to this position.

3.1 The libertarian educators' views on reading

To my knowledge no one has yet written a comprehensive survey of the libertarian educators' views on learning to read. I cannot undertake such a project here; rather, I merely wish to provide some context as to why I feel it is necessary to present this chapter's arguments at all. If the libertarian educators did not display such a nonchalant attitude toward reading, it would not be so important to argue that learning to read is, in fact, vital to even a libertarian education.

3.1.1 A. S. Neill

Unsurprisingly, the most lax of the libertarian educators in this respect (as in others) was Neill. In part, his attitude toward learning to read reflects his personal view of books:

[I]f a child borrows a book and leaves it out in the rain, my wife gets angry because books mean much to her. In such a case, I am personally indifferent, for books have little value for me. On the other hand, my wife seems vaguely surprised when I make a fuss about a ruined chisel. I value tools, but tools mean little to her. (1992: 109)

Neill's individual preference for tools and manual work over books and reading is displayed in his educational views:

Only pedants claim that learning from books is education. Books are the least important apparatus in a school. All that any child needs is the three Rs; the rest should be tools and clay and sports and theatre and paint and freedom. (102)

In this instance, he is clearly referring to “book learning” — that is, the information that one acquires *only* from books, rather than from one's own experience in the world. Although he does acknowledge the importance of “the three Rs” (presumably reading, writing, and arithmetic), he makes no argument for why even these three are necessary in a radically free education. I argue in a later section that learning to read *is* necessary in order to be educationally free, in part because knowing how to read grants one access to “book learning.”

Although his view of reading and books is generally flippant, Neill vehemently opposes censorship: “I am strongly against censorship of books at any age” (1992: 36). This pronouncement has less to do with his opinion on the importance or unimportance of learning to read, and more to do with his consistent opposition to all indoctrination in matters of sexual ethics, religion, and so on. If children are interested in a book, let them read it — whether it is about ghost stories or moonlit trysts or bicycle maintenance. In fact, this comment about censorship is symptomatic of a larger trend in Neill's writing: he has far more to say about *what* children read and learn (i.e., arguing that they should be free to follow their interests) than with *how and why*.

Finally, Neill insists that children who are not made to learn to read by a certain age, or at all, can still have successful adult lives. There are in fact three parts to this claim: children do not need to learn to read according to adult timelines; children do not need to be *made* to learn to read; and children can “succeed in life” (a result that Neill leaves unspecified) without learning to read. With respect to the first part, Neill says,

[A certain] kind of parent is not content to leave Willie to learn to read when he wants to, but nervously fears that Willie will be a failure in life unless he is pushed. Such parents cannot wait for the child to go at his own rate. They ask, 'If my son cannot read at twelve, what chance has he of success in life? If he cannot pass college entrance exams at eighteen, what is there for him but an unskilled job?' But I have learned to wait and watch a child make little or no progress. I never doubt that in the end, if not molested or damaged, he will succeed in life. (1992: 125)

This argument, that we need not pressure children to acquire reading at a young age, resurfaces in Holt's ideas about reading. It has no direct bearing on whether or not children should be made to learn to read *at all*, which is the focus of this chapter. I say more about *when and how* we should teach children to read in Chapter Four.

To illustrate the second part of his claim, that children do not need to be *made* to learn to read, Neill tells the following anecdote:

[Tom] came to Summerhill at the age of five. He left at seventeen, without having in all those years gone to a single lesson. He spent much time in the workshop making things. His father and mother trembled with apprehension about his future. He never showed any desire to learn to read. But one night when he was nine, I found him in bed reading *David Copperfield*. 'Hullo,' I said. 'Who taught you to read?' 'I taught myself.' " (1992: 125)

And that is all Neill has to say about the matter. To be sure, there are many children like Tom who learn to read with no formal instruction. In Chapter Four, I argue that a libertarian pedagogy of reading respects the freedom of such self-taught readers. But the fact that *some* children acquire reading this way says nothing about what we ought to do with those children who do not.

Neill tells yet another story to demonstrate that children can succeed in life without the ability to read.

There was Jack, a boy who could not learn to read. No one could teach Jack. Even when he asked for a reading lesson, there was some hidden obstruction that kept him from distinguishing between b and p, l and k. He left school at seventeen without the ability to read. Today, Jack is an expert toolmaker. He loves to talk about metalwork. He can read now; but so far as I know, he mainly reads articles about mechanical things — and sometimes he reads works on psychology. I do not think he has ever read a novel; yet he speaks perfectly grammatical English, and his

general knowledge is remarkable. An American visitor, knowing nothing of his story, said to me, ‘What a clever lad Jack is!’ (1992: 126)

Today Jack would certainly be labeled ‘dyslexic’ and would receive related interventions. Whether interventions for students with learning difficulties have a place in a libertarian approach to reading is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I include Neill’s account of Jack in order to demonstrate my present point: Neill considered reading sufficiently unimportant for education that pressure and formal instruction were unwarranted. Most children, he believed, would find their own path to reading, and even if they did not they could still live happy and productive lives. It is precisely this flippancy toward learning to read that I argue against in this chapter.

3.1.2 Ivan Illich

Neill’s flippancy in this matter should not be surprising, given his lax attitude toward all other aspects of education. What is rather more unexpected is that Illich too sees reading as a non-essential, as one potential skill to be learned among many other, equally legitimate options. Two quotes illustrate my point:

For most widely shared skills, a person who demonstrates the skill is the only human resource we ever need or get. Whether in speaking or driving, in cooking or in the use of communication equipment, we are often barely conscious of formal instruction and learning, especially after our first experience of the materials in question. I see no reason why other complex skills, such as the mechanical aspects of surgery and playing the fiddle, of *reading* or the use of directories and catalogues, could not be learned in the same way. (1970: 88, emphasis added)

Such centers could and should be established in industrialized areas, at least for those skills which are fundamental prerequisites for entering certain apprenticeships — such skills as *reading*, typing, keeping accounts, foreign languages, computer programming and number manipulation, reading special languages such as that of electrical circuits, manipulation of certain machinery, etc. (90, emphasis added)

In neither list does Illich give any indication that reading might have a special importance for self-education. On the contrary, by lumping reading along with a wide variety of other skills as diverse

as ‘playing the fiddle’ and ‘keeping accounts,’ Illich implies that all these skills share the same status or value. Clearly ‘playing the fiddle’ is a skill an individual might decide to learn for her own purposes; we would never suggest that *everyone* should be trained to do so. Similarly, although ‘keeping accounts’ may have a wider applicability than ‘playing the fiddle,’ only professional bookkeepers need to learn to do so according to formalized standards. Indeed, every single skill listed — *with the exception of reading* — is needed only for specialized vocational or leisure pursuits that are typically chosen by the individual. Not one of them would be considered mandatory for all students, regardless of personal preference. In the absence of any indication to the contrary, the implication is that reading is equally optional and self-chosen. Especially since knowing how to read would almost certainly be necessary for using of the “learning webs” Illich advocates as alternatives to compulsory, curriculum-driven schooling (72-104), failing to acknowledge the special status of learning to read is a major oversight on Illich’s part¹⁷.

Aside from the two lists quoted above, Illich rarely refers explicitly to acquiring the skill of reading. His only other mentions of reading are in a brief discussion of Paulo Freire’s work with adults learning to read (1970: 18) and as an example to demonstrate that “[m]ost learning happens casually” (12):

Fluency in reading is also more often than not a result of such extracurricular activities. Most people who read widely, and with pleasure, merely believe that they learned to do so in school; when challenged, they easily discard this illusion. (13)

¹⁷ In fact, the two lists quoted above are taken from Illich’s discussion of one of those learning webs, the network of “skill teachers” (1970: 87). Illich suggests that learners can acquire reading, among other skills, primarily by watching another demonstrate that skill (87-88). But the question still remains of how someone who could not read would access the network of skill teachers (including demonstrators of reading) in the first place!

Clearly, this idea that learning to read is not always or even often dependent on formal instruction is a consistent theme among the libertarian educators. Yet whether learning to read requires formal teaching and whether it should be required at all are two separate questions.

Given Illich's recognition that formal structures (such as his convivial institutions) form a necessary context for learner-directed education, it is surprising he overlooks the importance of ensuring that all children acquire reading. It seems likely that this neglect stems less from a deliberate decision on Illich's part and more from his overall focus on adolescent and adult learners, who can be presumed to have already mastered the basics of reading. However, the necessity of reading poses a problem for applying his libertarian educational ideas; indeed, as useful as the four "learning webs" he describes may be, a student who cannot read would be greatly hampered in making use of these resources for self-education.

3.1.3 John Holt

Holt has far more to say about reading than either Neill or Illich. Consistent with his generally pragmatist approach toward most educational matters, he appears to simply assume that all children *should* learn to read. Moreover, given the right circumstances they will *want* to do so; it is only inappropriate pressure from adults that makes them dislike reading and resist learning to read (or, conversely, fear failing to learn to read so much that their ability to learn is paralyzed). Many of Holt's ideas about *how* we should teach children to read are consistent with the modified libertarian approach that I advocate in this thesis, so I revisit them in Chapter Four. At present I merely give a brief overview of a few key ideas he has about reading.

First, he repeatedly emphasizes that written language is fundamentally connected to spoken language. By the time they reach school age, children generally talk and listen without any difficulty. In fact, they hardly think about the fact that they are doing so; they simply use the oral language

they have acquired to communicate with those around them. Holt suggests that they should view written language similarly: “If from the start [children] could think of writing as a way of saying something, and reading as a way of knowing what others are saying, they would write and read with much more interest and excitement” (Holt 1967: 111). But formal instruction in reading obscures this connection between spoken and written language. “Almost everything we do about reading, in school or out, hides the vital fact that writing is an extension of speech, that behind every written word there is a human voice speaking, and that reading is the way to hear what those voices are saying” (Holt 1972: 221). Holt implies that if we find a way to help children see reading and writing as simply another way of communicating with valued others (perhaps via something like Jenkins’ participatory culture), they will learn to do so all the more readily.

This correspondence between spoken and written language is important not only for motivating children to learn to read and write. It also indicates, according to Holt, that reading is far easier to learn than we often assume.

All over the world, children learn this extraordinary amount of information [i.e., oral language], most of it by the time they are six, and most of it, as I have described, by themselves, without anything that we could call formal instruction. Compared with this task, the task of learning to read even English is very, very small. To be sure, it can’t be done overnight; but it certainly doesn’t deserve all the worry and agony that we put into it. All we accomplish, by our worrying, simplifying, and teaching, is to make reading a hundred times harder for children than it need be. (Holt 1967: 108-109)

Like Neill and Illich, Holt cites the example of children who learn to read without formal instruction. But he goes further: he proposes a constructive response to this phenomenon. “Many thousands of children teach themselves to read, every year; we might do well to find out how many such children there are, and how they taught themselves” (1967: 91). To be sure, such children do not learn to read without *any* assistance. Holt gives examples from his own interactions with young children who were in the process of learning to read (see 1967: 86-114); in each instance, he tried

to give the information necessary for the child to get beyond the present hurdle, and then backed away, allowing them to continue learning without too much intervention. But Holt's attitude toward the role of adult help in teaching oneself to read is generally dismissive. He discusses the case of a young boy who went to "one of those schools in which children are not required to attend classes, but learn when, and what they like, with whatever help from the older people around them they may choose to ask for" (1967: 106) — i.e., a school much like Summerhill. According to Holt, the boy was unable to read when he went to this school. While there, without attending any classes, he began (among other things) both to read and to work with electronics. Holt explains,

The electronics suggests how this seeming miracle [of him learning to read without formal instruction] was accomplished. There are no electronics manuals, texts, and instruction books written for young children. To use them, you must be able to read words like 'resistor,' 'capacitor,' 'potentiometer,' and the like. *No doubt this boy had to have help at first*; but in learning to read the basic terms of electronics he undoubtedly got enough information about letters and sounds to enable him to read any words he met. (1967: 106-107, emphasis mine)

The need for and nature of that initial help, which Holt simply mentions in passing, is precisely what I wish to establish in this and the next chapter.

Holt goes on to say that, rather than acknowledging the existence of self-taught readers and seeking to learn from them, educators ignore them and send children "hidden messages" that suggest teaching oneself to read is impossible.

We all of us, teachers, parents, the government, society as a whole, seem to children to be saying two things. The first is, 'If we didn't make you read, you lazy good-for-nothing, you never would — but we *are* going to make you.' The second is, 'Reading is so difficult and so complicated and you are so stupid that unless we lead you into it tiny step by tiny step, like a blind man being led down a rough path, you'll never be able to figure it out. (1972: 222, emphasis original)

What makes such hidden messages particularly harmful for students is that they are coupled with the great pressure placed on learning to read. "From the very beginning of school we make books and reading a constant source of possible failure and public humiliation" (Holt 1969: 84). One

aspect of this pressure that is particularly worrying to Holt and the other libertarian educators is the *speed* with which we expect children to learn to read. We are so worried that children will not acquire reading in time that we do not give them time to make mistakes, either in the moment of reading a passage (Holt 1967: 100) or over the course of learning to read (107). And of course, this pressure to learn quickly, according to someone else's timetable, only increases the fear of failure discussed in Chapter One. I say more about both fear of failure and timetables in Chapter Four.

All the hidden messages and pressure and insistence on speedy learning add up to create “the stigma and shame of being a nonreader” (Holt 1972: 223). Holt offers a humorous suggestion to make a serious point: “Maybe we need to say ‘Illiteracy is OK.’ Maybe we need signs and buttons saying ILLITERATE POWER. For to make not knowing something a disgrace is to make it certain that many people will never learn it.” He recognizes that this is not feasible, but there is a more realistic solution he *does* recommend.

All this is fanciful, of course. But there is something useful we might do. We could just cool it for a while. We could try to learn what experience ought by now to have made plain, that learning to write and read is much simpler than many things children learn for themselves, something that anyone with a good reason for learning it can master in a matter of months or even weeks. Above all, we could try to revive or to keep alive in children the sense that learning to read is not external to them, somehow lying outside them, but is instead within them, a natural extension of their own powers. (1972: 224)

Note that this recommendation to “just cool it for a while” is not incompatible with my argument that learning to read should be a requirement for all children; in Chapter Four I discuss how we might preserve the requirement without pressuring children to acquire reading. Indeed, both requiring children to learn to read and allowing them to do so at their own pace and in their own way have the same purpose: both the *why* and the *how* are intended to let reading, and the learning it leads to, be “a natural extension of [children’s] own powers.” This is simply another way of

saying that the overall goal of libertarian education is for children to “tak[e] control of their own learning” (Illich 1970: 8).

To summarize, the libertarian educators’ resistance toward any and all educational requirements applies even to learning to read. Both Neill and Illich downplay or ignore the importance of reading. In the case of Neill, this relates directly to his own disinterest in books, while Illich was more focused on older students who presumably had already acquired reading. Holt gives a more in-depth treatment of learning to read, but implies that many students are able to teach themselves to do so with little or no adult intervention. None of the libertarian educators ever gives any indication that learning to read should be mandatory for all students. In contrast to this view, I argue in this chapter that learning to read *is* educationally essential, even in the context of a radically free education, *in order to* ensure that students are able to control their own learning.

3.2 Defining reading

Before arguing that learning to read is a necessary component of even the most libertarian education, I must first define what I mean by ‘reading.’ I begin with the most common view of reading in education, which defines it as a specifiable set of language skills. I then modify this understanding by discussing the social practices of reading. Both of these approaches are useful for thinking about why the ability to read is necessary for self-education.

3.2.1 The skills approach

Reading is often thought of as one of the traditional four “language arts,” the other three being listening, speaking, and writing (e.g. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers 2010). These language arts are typically categorized as follows: listening and speaking are oral language skills, while reading and writing are written language skills; and listening and reading are receptive language skills, while speaking and writing

are productive language skills. Although widely used in elementary classrooms, this classification scheme oversimplifies the complex relationship among these language skills.

First, as Holt emphasizes repeatedly (e.g. 1967: 111, 1972: 221), the symbol system of written language is based on that of oral language. This is especially true in an alphabetic writing system like English, where written language directly encodes the sounds of oral language (although even in a language with a writing system based on syllabic or semantic units, the oral basis is still important). Of course, children must eventually become able to learn new words from reading without having heard them previously; but when they are first learning to decode, the words they encounter are all words they already know. For this reason, one important part of learning to decode is “sounding out” words: making audible the connections between the character on the page and the spoken sound, and from there recombining sounds into a whole word (Armbruster et al. 2009: 19). In this way, beginning readers reveal the oral foundation of written language.

Furthermore, at the most basic level, oral language and written language serve the same purpose: communication. Written language does allow us to communicate across greater distances of time-space; it also enables us to communicate complex or abstract information that would be difficult for an oral audience to comprehend. But written language is not wholly distinct from oral language: it is a different tool for accomplishing very similar goals. Therefore, the reason for learning to read (and write) is substantially the same as the reason for learning to speak (and listen). Neither type of language skill exists merely for the purpose of being able to exercise a complicated skill; both exist for purposes beyond themselves. We learn language (in all its varieties) in order to more easily carry on a greater range of human interactions.

Just as classifying language skills as either written or oral obscures their mutual basis in communication, so too classifying them as either productive or receptive implies a false division of

labor in the process of communicating. Speaking and writing are often categorized as active, while listening and reading are considered passive. The terms used above – ‘productive’ and ‘receptive’ – avoid this danger, but they still imply that listening and reading *merely* require receptivity to the meanings that are actively generated by another person. On the contrary, as Hall (1980/1973) demonstrated, decoding a received message is just as active a process as encoding that message in the first place. The meaning of the message is generated by the producers working together with the receivers; neither side has total control over what the message “says.” This holds true whether the medium is oral or written language (or television broadcast, Hall’s example), whether the producers and receivers are close together or far apart in time-space, whether they share many mutually accepted means of encoding and decoding or only a few.

For these reasons, the standard categorization of the language arts is overly simplistic. However, it *does* point to some useful differences among these closely interrelated language skills. Written language enables and constrains in different ways than oral language: when we use written language we are able to communicate with other humans who are far away in time-space, but (for the very same reason) we cannot rely on context clues to disambiguate multiple meanings in the same way we do when we use oral language. Thus, although the oral basis of written language is important, so too are the differences between them. As for the productive/receptive distinction, although it is true that readers and listeners are just as active in producing meaning as writers and speakers, they are constrained in different ways: writers must bear in mind the expected interpretations of their intended audience, while readers must attend to the writer’s intended meaning as they interpret it from the text. Otherwise, effective communication is impossible. Yet even as we affirm these conceptual differences among the language arts, we must bear in mind that in practice reading, writing, listening, and speaking are always interwoven and mutually embedded

(Ahearn 2012: 141-142). So reading is a distinct skill in its own right *and at the same time* both developmentally and practically related to other language skills of listening, speaking, and writing.

The skills-based approach to reading specifies not only the skills *outside* the definition of reading (i.e., listening, speaking, writing) but also the skills *inside* that definition. Generalizing from over 100,000 research studies, Armbruster et al. (2009) identify the following skills as essential components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension (i-ii). They define phonemic awareness as “the ability to notice, think about, and work with the individual sounds in spoken words” (1) and phonics as “the relationships between the letters (graphemes) of written language and the individual sounds (phonemes) of spoken language” (11). Together, phonemic awareness and phonics enable readers to decode written text in alphabetic languages (such as English). But reading by “sounding out” individual letters can be a slow and difficult process; when readers have to concentrate on decoding each word separately, the beginning of a sentence or even a word is often forgotten by the time the last letters have been decoded. For this reason, readers also need to develop “the ability to read a text accurately and quickly,” or fluency (19). Fluency is far from a superfluous add-on for those who want to read more quickly or dramatically; it is a vital skill in the transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” – which is, ultimately the goal of a libertarian approach to teaching reading.

In addition to phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency, readers need to have a substantial working vocabulary in order to understand what they are reading. Vocabulary is not a distinct skill that can be practiced like phonemic awareness or fluency; rather, it is a knowledge base that is expanded and improved throughout the lifetime. Because we “learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language” (Armbruster et al. 2009: 30), vocabulary is heavily dependent on both background knowledge and prior

reading.¹⁸ Finally, “[c]omprehension is the reason for reading” (41). Armbruster et al. emphasize that comprehension is both purposeful and active; as discussed above, reading is not the passive reception of someone else’s meaning.

This skills-based approach is a good way to begin thinking about what reading is. It helps us consider the differences between reading and other closely related language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, and writing), and the necessary components of being able to read (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension). Moreover, it is relatively easy to measure progress in acquiring isolated skills, so defining reading in terms of skills alone is quite popular in an educational environment committed to regulation, assessment, and quantification. But as we have already begun to see in the discussion of vocabulary, skills alone are not enough. Tests of skills leave out a central dimension of reading: motivation. In so doing, they fail to capture the full nature of reading. Thus, in order to really understand what reading is, we need to think about *why* we read.

3.2.2 The social practice approach

Although we may read for many different reasons, the one thing all these purposes have in common is that they connect one human (the reader) with another (the writer). The skills approach treats readers (and writers) as isolated individuals, but all language — and thus all reading — is “socially charged” (Bakhtin 1981: 293, quoted in Ahearn 2012: 3). Even in the case of an impersonal encyclopedia article, *someone* (or possibly several people) composed that article. We turn to that other person, not to solidify our relationship with them (as when we read a love letter, for example), but for access to information that they have and we do not. Moreover, the skills approach expects students to master conventions of phonics and spelling, vocabulary and grammar,

¹⁸ When we know most of the words in a text, we can usually figure out any unknown words based on context; in this way, widespread reading greatly improves students’ vocabularies.

genre, and so on; yet these conventions must be *mutual* expectations and *shared* codes of interpretation.¹⁹ Thus, whatever else it may be, reading is fundamentally composed of social practices: “not specific, observable occurrences but rather general norms regarding how written texts tend to be produced, interpreted, or discussed” (Ahearn 2012: 143). The social practices of written language are structures in the sense discussed in Chapter Two: sets of rules and resources that only exist as they are enacted by human agency, and both enable and constrain the very human actions that reproduce or alter them.

As I have already emphasized, making meaning from written language is something that individuals *do* themselves — meanings do not simply appear in the mind when one encounters a written text. For written communication to be successful, both writers and readers must exercise their agency in producing meaning. But the meaning they produce is not free-floating; it is bound by the rules and resources of the written code and of the oral language on which it is based. Those linguistic rules and resources give shape to acts of reading and writing even as they are reinforced or challenged by those same human acts. Writers and readers cannot use words or letters in any way they like: for communication to be successful, both sides must adhere to the conventional uses of language (ranging from established meanings of words and phrases to norms of spelling and punctuation to expectations regarding genre, register, style, and tone). By constraining the possible meanings that writers can intend and readers can interpret, such linguistic conventions enable communication between two (or more) parties to take place. Yet they do not do so deterministically, but are always recreated by the meaningful decisions of individual human agents as they engage in acts of reading and writing.

¹⁹ For more on this important point, see Wittgenstein’s anti-private language argument (Wittgenstein 2009: 95ff).

So reading, like all language and indeed all social practices, has two aspects: the conventional and the creative. Far from existing in opposition, each is an indispensable part of the other. Readers must make use of all the relevant conventions, mutually shared expectations among language users, in order to interpret the writer's communicative intent in producing the message. This is just as true of seemingly simple informational texts as of highly obscure literary passages. In order to understand the text "2 cups of flour" a reader must respect conventions regarding numerals, units of measurement, and names for ingredients (which can vary greatly from region to region even within English), as well as the genre conventions for recipes. Likewise, in order to make sense of the text "The Eleventh Hour: 3 April 2010," the reader must not only know the literal meanings of the words 'the eleventh hour' but also recognize (perhaps based on context in a television magazine or on the BBC's website) that this is the name of the first episode in the fifth series of the television show *Doctor Who*²⁰ – not to mention the conventions regarding dates and times (in this case, regionally specific conventions: dates are encoded differently in Britain than in America). We do not protest these conventions as too constraining; just as train tracks enable the train to move by constraining its movement, so too linguistic conventions are what make it possible for linguistic communication to take place at all. Anyone who has ever visited another country and tried to communicate using hand gestures alone knows just how enabling linguistic conventions are.²¹

Yet reading is *just as much* creative as conventional. Readers may use slightly (or significantly) different conventions than the original writer anticipated, leading to

²⁰ Upon seeing the episode, its name would take on even greater meanings due to the convergence of the non-literal meaning of the phrase, the episode plot, and the fact that it was the first full episode for the Eleventh Doctor. But it would not be necessary to know any of these additional meanings in order to decode when the episode would air.

²¹ Of course hand gestures are also conventional!

miscommunications or unintended meanings.²² Even if readers' and writers' conventions are sufficiently close to avoid ineffective communication or embarrassing situations, readers must still actively generate the meaning of the text. For skillful readers this process is so automatic that it seems almost passive; but observation of beginning readers reveals the amount of *work* required to make sense of a text. A novice reader may have to sound out individual letters phonetically, reassemble those sounds into recognizable words using phonemic awareness, remember the meanings of words and decipher unfamiliar words using context clues or other vocabulary aides, reassemble individual words into whole sentences with sufficient fluency to remember the beginning once they reach the end —without even entering into the matters of genre, nonliteral meaning, text-to-world connections, and more, all of which are necessary for comprehension (see Armbruster et al. 2009). Yet even the experienced reader who does most or all of these tasks habitually is still *actively making meaning* in her own mind. No one else can 'understand' the text for her; *she* must *create* meaning for herself. Moreover, she is *enabled* to do so by the *constraints* of the text, conventions, and other interpretive methods.

Understanding reading as the creative use of conventions for written language helps us see what it is that children must learn when they learn to read. Learning the relevant conventions is a key part of acquiring reading; for this reason, beginning reading programs often involve not only extensive practice reading but also explicit instruction in phonics, vocabulary, and genre conventions (such as character, setting, and plot for fiction; and table of contents, index, and picture captions for non-fiction). But learning to be creative with those conventions is just as important. This does not necessarily mean that children should ignore the conventions or do what

²² See Giddens 1984: 99-100 for several humorous examples, although he discusses them in relation to speakers' rather than listeners' agency.

they like with written language.²³ But it does mean that they must learn to actively employ the appropriate conventions in order to create meaning from the text; they cannot simply sit back and let someone else “make meaning” for them²⁴. Creativity and convention, agency-within-structure are the very nature of reading (and writing); learning to creatively and actively use, recreate, and even alter conventions of written language is what it means to learn to read.

Emphasizing the social practices of reading does not negate the need to master certain skills; rather, it situates skills use in the social contexts that motivate readers to exercise their ability to read. Combining the skills approach and the social practice approach allows us to formulate the following definition of reading: reading is the activity of *making meaning from written text*, doing so *actively and purposively*, by means of *creative use of shared conventions*. In this definition, I focus on the activity of *making* meaning. I emphasize that this process is both *active and creative* and *social and conventional*. We could also say much about the *meaning* itself that is made – the role of background knowledge in interpretation, the significance of the actual texts used in reading instruction, and the possibility that reading itself can be a way to change the world (see Freire 2000). *Making meaning* is one process; we cannot separate, except conceptually, the *making* from the *meaning*. But for the purpose of this thesis, in accordance with my ongoing concern with students’ agency, I concentrate on *why and how* students make meaning; I only touch in passing on *what* meaning they make.²⁵

²³ However, “playing around” with conventions is often an important developmental step in learning those very conventions. For example, early readers may “read” a story using only the pictures, with little regard for the written text. Likewise, beginning writers are often encouraged to “invent” spellings for words they know how to say but not write, in order to free them to continue their compositions without worrying about conventional spelling.

²⁴ This is true even if the text is read out loud to them.

²⁵ In addition to the content of the text that is read, I also bracket several other issues. I focus my discussion on English, leaving aside issues relevant to other languages. I do not directly consider the experiences of diversely-abled students (e.g. sight or hearing impaired), or of speakers of

Now that I have defined reading in a way that gives equal weight to both the creative and the conventional aspects of making meaning from written text, I turn to my arguments that learning to read, in this sense, is a necessary part of any education, even — or rather, especially — the most libertarian.

3.3 Why reading is necessary for self-education

Just as we might define reading differently for different purposes, so too we might make a variety of arguments for why all children must learn to read. Knowing how to read is indisputably economically advantageous: in our society, most jobs require at least a minimal ability to understand written language. Reading is also essential for continuing education — not only in the direct way that I discuss below, but also more indirectly: the certificates that open doors to further education (diplomas, standardized tests, etc.) depend heavily on demonstrated ability to read. And learning to read has even been claimed to affect the way people think and reason, thereby opening up ways of learning that are inaccessible to wholly oral individuals and societies — though the exact details of what cognitive and social changes occur are disputed (see Ahearn 2012: 145-147).

I do not dispute the validity of any of these arguments for requiring students to learn to read. But they do fall outside the range of concerns that would be relevant to a committed libertarian educator²⁶. For this reason, I focus exclusively on arguments that are based on

vernacular varieties of English, in learning to read. And I do not address the various ways in which one may be said to ‘read’ things beside written language, such as fashion, body language, or ‘the times.’ Although these are important and relevant considerations, an adequate discussion of them is beyond the scope of this thesis.

²⁶ A further argument that *would* be of interest to libertarian educators is that knowing how to read brings the individual a sense of empowerment and autonomy; conversely, being classified as “illiterate” can significantly contribute to feelings of marginalization, disempowerment, and helplessness (see Holt 1972: 223 and Freire 2000). In fact, this argument could be considered the *quintessential* libertarian argument for requiring all children to learn to read. However, in this thesis I am interested in exploring the *direct* relationship between the ability to read and the ability

libertarian educational principles. If the goal of libertarian education is for students to “tak[e] control of their own learning” (Illich 1970: 8), then making sure they learn to read is an essential piece of meeting that goal. In our society²⁷, I argue, knowing how to read is a major gateway to the very possibility of self-teaching. I give two main reasons why this is so: first, many *ways of learning* (in our society, at least) require the ability to read, and second, reading provides *both exposure and guidance* (two areas in which the educational theories of Neill, Holt, and Illich were lacking).

3.3.1 Reading-dependent ways of learning

It may seem obvious that many important avenues to learning depend on the ability to read, but this fact must be emphasized in response to the libertarian educators. At the most basic level, the ability to read is necessary for making effective use of learning webs such as those advocated by Illich (1970: 72-104) and their Web-based successors: search engines, online videos, digital archives, etc. The Internet has made available a multitude of self-teaching resources, making libertarian education achievable in more areas than Neill, Holt, and Illich could ever have imagined (see Hart 2001). But nearly all resources for online learning presuppose the ability to make sense of written language. For example, in order to find a YouTube video demonstrating how to perform a skateboard trick or throw a pot, one must first be able to type the appropriate words into the search bar²⁸ and to recognize the desired video by reading its title and description as well as by looking at its thumbnail image. The self-teaching resources of the Internet are an

to self-educate. So as important as the argument concerning felt empowerment is, I do not address it at length here.

²⁷ In this thesis I do not address the question of whether we should impose reading on students in societies that do not have a significant tradition of written culture and scholarship. Aside from being beyond the scope of this thesis, this issue seems likely to become obsolete before too long due to globalization.

²⁸ Although search and auto-correction software are becoming increasingly adept at working around users' mistypings and misspellings, some understanding of the conventions of written language is still needed both to generate the initial input and to guard against the software's inevitable mistakes.

important reading-dependent method of learning, especially because of their potential for the type of informal, student-directed education advocated by the libertarian educators. But we must also consider other ways of learning that depend on the ability to read.

Books and other written materials – both fiction and non-fiction – contain a wealth of ideas and information that can both teach students about the world beyond their everyday lives *and* enrich their immediate experiences. Libertarian educators emphasize the importance of experiential learning, learning that is directly connected to students' lives and that comes from their observations of the world and attempts to do things for themselves, as opposed to “book learning.” However, the range of things that can be learned experientially is limited to the experiences available in the students' immediate surroundings. Reading enables them to learn things that they would never directly encounter in their day-to-day lives. For example, a modern-day student who is interested in the history of Medieval Britain cannot learn anywhere near as much from “experience” (even including visits to museums and archaeological digs) as she can from “book learning.” Moreover, what she learns at museums and historical sites will be supplemented, interpreted, and shaped by what she reads. Students' interests may be far removed from their immediate experience in place as well as in time: for example, a student growing up in the Midwestern United States might want to learn about marine biology. Although traveling to a less land-locked region would certainly be a good, experiential way to pursue this interest, if such travel is not available, reading provides another effective way to learn what the student does not have direct access to. And even if the student *can* travel to observe ocean wildlife directly, “book learning” will once again guide and fill out the learning gained from experience. In this way, learning to read bridges Illich's distinction between “skill-learning” and “liberal education” (1970: 17): although in one sense reading is a set of skills to be acquired, the skill of reading *in particular* has a fundamental

relationship with the kind of “open-ended, exploratory” education Illich intends by the term “liberal.” Other skills, such as playing the fiddle and keeping accounts, simply do not share this close relationship to liberal, horizon-broadening learning.

Of course, Neill would respond that whatever is outside the children’s immediate context is of no interest or relevance to them (1992: 18-19, 102). But the very notion that “direct experience” and “book learning” are opposed to one another should be questioned. Just as in Chapter Two we turned the dichotomy between freedom and constraint into a duality of agency and structure, so here we must view reading and experience as mutually supporting and enriching educational endeavors. Not only does children’s experience influence what they want to read and how they think about what they read, but also “book learning” can directly relate to children’s immediate lives of “tools and clay and sports and theatre and paint and freedom” (Neill 1992: 102). Non-fiction reading might suggest something new for the child to make or do (see the discussion below about exposure through reading), and reading fiction as well as poetry and drama may lead her to new ways of interacting with her siblings or friends, exploring the natural world around her, or understanding herself. Reading brings a child these educational benefits even if she *never* wants to learn about anything other than her everyday life.

Even so, the libertarian educators might protest that requiring all children to learn to read in order to broaden their horizons – either by teaching them about the world beyond their immediate context or by enriching their experience of the day-to-day – merely imposes on children adult beliefs that certain kinds of learning (i.e., those that broaden horizons) are better or more worthwhile than others; such educational norms have no place in a libertarian education. But the point is not that students *should* broaden their horizons through reading, or even that they *will* be interested in doing so (though it seems likely that many of them will). Rather, the claim I make

here is more moderate: *if* students are interested in learning *anything* beyond their everyday lives, or even if they want to think about their everyday lives in new ways, then reading provides access to a wide range of information and ideas. Knowing how to read significantly expands the range of things that students *can* learn, and so teaching them to read is an important way to support and enable their developing educational agency. Whether or not they choose to exercise that agency by reading to learn is irrelevant to the argument.

Finally, it seems likely that some specific ways of *thinking*, as well as learning, depend on written language. Certain aesthetic aspects of human experience may only be accessible by means of *written* (rather than oral) fiction, poetry, and drama. Similarly, it may be impossible to pursue certain types of scholarship, such as philosophy and history, without written language to enable communication about technical or abstract matters, and over long stretches of both space and time. To give just one example, oral histories are generally considered reliable for at most two generations (i.e., about one and a half centuries); the historical study of older periods requires written records — *and* the historian's ability to read them! In this thesis I cannot argue fully whether such writing-dependent modes of human thought exist, and if so, what they are. But if they do exist, then learning to think in writing-dependent ways is yet another way of learning that requires the ability to read.

To summarize, learning to read gives children access to learning methods that non-readers cannot use: the self-teaching resources of the Internet, information and ideas that both enrich and extend experiential learning, and potentially even writing-dependent types of human thought. In order to be truly supportive of children's educational agency, a libertarian education must ensure that children can learn in these ways if they choose to do so — but they can only choose reading-dependent ways of learning as part of their self-education if they are able to read.

3.3.2 Reading as exposure and guidance

My second argument for requiring all children to learn to read is that doing so partially meets the need for both exposure and guidance, two areas in which the libertarian educators' views were consistently lacking, as I argued in Chapter One. Just as students who can read are able to learn about whatever they are interested in, no matter how far outside the scope of their everyday lives such interests fall, so too anyone who reads widely is automatically exposed to topics and ideas they might never have encountered otherwise. Of course, reading is hardly the only way in which children acquire new interests; I have already mentioned the importance of both adults and peers in generating or fostering, as well as undermining, children's interests. But reading certainly plays an important role in helping children discover new things they *might* want to learn about. For example, reading an informative article about sharks might spark an interest in learning about marine ecosystems. Reading can even give rise to interests in "hands-on" activities, which libertarian educators would argue are learned best by doing: a historical fiction book might lead a student to want to learn how to do calligraphy or embroidery. And once these interests come into being, well-written how-to manuals will certainly help the student pursue her new interest — *along with* personal experience and practice, of course. In addition, readers can even browse through encyclopedias, library shelves, catalogs of activity manuals and kits, and other sources of inspiration for learning. Where non-readers are limited to any available images, readers can make use of tables of contents, short encyclopedia texts, book synopses, and other written sources to make informed decisions about what areas of learning they want to pursue further. In all these ways, reading helps to provide children with necessary exposure to potential areas of learning.

Of course, just ensuring that children *can* read is no guarantee that they *will* choose to do so, as I have already stressed. And so it is no guarantee that they will receive the benefits of exposure via reading. This is why reading is also relevant for guidance. The mere ability to read

can never substitute for the individualized care and concern of an adult mentor, offering guidance as to what areas might be useful, interesting, or important for a particular child to pursue. But such a mentor can also use the child's ability to read in order to guide her in finding out what she wants to learn. For example, if she has no idea what she wants to study (as was the case with Winifred at Summerhill), the mentor might suggest browsing an encyclopedia, reading several short articles or book excerpts, or even reading a few books on various topics. All of these reading activities can give the student a sample of the many possible things she might learn; at the same time, if she shares her reactions to what she reads (either in person or by means of a reading log), the mentor can gain valuable insight into what the student might want to study further.

In addition, the ability to read provides some protection against poor guidance. Imagine going to an ice cream shop with a very young child. You ask which flavor she wants, pointing to the board where they are all listed. But since she cannot read yet, she asks you to read them out to her — and there may be several dozen of them! In order to save yourself effort, you reply, “Vanilla, chocolate, or strawberry.” Students who cannot read are susceptible to the same incomplete guidance, whether the adults in their lives are lazy, sloppy, malicious, or ignorant — or even benevolently paternalistic. But the student who *can* read has the ability to check whether there are more options for learning than she has been told about. Whether she will actually do so or not is, once again, beside the point.

Finally, teaching children to read provides guidance in an even more fundamental way. When we require all children to learn to read, they learn that reading is important; and when we do so in a manner consistent with their developing control over their learning (as I discuss in the next chapter), we help them see that reading — not just the ability, but the active exercise of that ability — is an important part of being a self-directed learner. Students who have been taught not

only how to read but also how to explore learning possibilities through reading (as I have outlined above) understand how to make use of written language (books, library catalogs, Internet search engines, informative websites, and much more) in order to control their own educations. Thus, making sure students learn to read is necessary for enabling their educational agency.

Seeing the relationship between reading and students' agency reminds us that agency is always embedded in structure. In the case of children, that structure is largely determined by the adults around them (though they themselves are active in shaping the structure, intentionally or unintentionally). Whether we decide that learning to read is required, recommended, optional, discouraged, or even forbidden, that decision forms part of the structure in which children live and act. Neutrality toward learning to read — as someone like Neill would advocate — does not make children's worlds any less structured; it merely changes the nature of that structure. Moreover, too little adult input into a child's learning can end up being especially constraining. We saw this vividly in the case of Winifred, who was constrained to choose to learn something uninteresting to her because Neill refused to help her discover something she *did* find interesting. The principle applies just as much to the general requirement that all children learn to read: making sure children can read is a constraint that greatly enables them to exercise agency in their learning.

3.3.3 Responses to objections

At this point the claim that knowing how to read is necessary for self-education could be objected to in several ways, both by those inside libertarian educational theory and by those without. A libertarian educator might respond to my argument thus far with the claim that there are many meaningful and enjoyable walks of life that require little or no reading; indeed, Neill takes more or less this position in dismissing the alleged importance of reading (1992: 125-133). This objection is a generalization of the contention that students are unlikely to be interested broadening their

horizons through reading. Accordingly, my response is very similar: the argument for the necessity of reading is just that we should do what we can to expand students' choices, both in education and in life. I do not say that we should require students to learn or to live in any particular way, merely that we should make available to them a sufficient range of options.

But this is only part of the answer, because there are other ways of giving students more choices that I am *not* advocating. To take an extreme example, I do not think we should teach and allow students to physically fight anyone who is unwilling to help them learn something! This is an illegitimate way of "increasing" their educational options, partly for ethical reasons that are beyond the scope of this thesis, but partly because the study of martial arts does not have an intimate relationship with the very possibility of education, as I am arguing reading does. The student who can use force on anyone who does not cooperate with her has greater control over her physical environment; under certain circumstances such a skill certainly increases the range of things that she can accomplish (even to the point of preserving her life), while under others it would be more likely to land her in jail. But the student who can read has greater control over her own learning, because she is less dependent on her immediate experience and what the adults around her are willing and able to tell her. To return to the original objection, her educational freedom is greater because she knows how to read, whether or not she chooses to read for self-education or for any other reason. Once again, the student who never learns to read has access to ways of living that do not rely on reading, and I do not dispute that many of those may be worthwhile and desirable. But the student who *can* read has access to those ways of living, *as well as ways of living that do rely on reading*. For this reason, the student who can read has greater freedom.

Two other objections would be unlikely to be raised by a libertarian educator, but must be dealt with nonetheless. The first, derived from Plato's *Phaedrus*, is that we are actually more likely

to forget something if we read it or write it down. In order to truly own what we learn, we should entrust it to our memory, not to paper. The second, much more modern objection is that technological advances will eventually render written language obsolete. All our communication and learning will take place by means of audio-visual materials. These two objections could be seen as opposites of each other: the first comes from those who nostalgically look back to past oral cultures, while the second comes from those who optimistically look forward to future technological innovations. Presented alone, either might appear daunting; but taken together, they for the most part cancel one another out. If good educational reasons exist for using “new” media such as audiobooks, instructional and informational videos, and video chats — and few would deny the potential educational benefits of these technologies, when used appropriately — then there are just as certainly good reasons for using written language in education, rather than relying *solely* on students’ (and teachers’!) memories. On the other hand, if we should not be too quick to entrust all our knowledge to paper rather than fixing it firmly in our own memories, then we should *also* be cautious about storing it in electronic format — setting aside the question, mentioned earlier, of whether there are some ideas that can *only* be expressed using written language and would be lost if we wholly converted to audio-visual media.

Memory, written language, and audio-visual materials are all tools. Human beings are very good at inventing ways to use tools, not only to do the same things a little bit better, but also to do entirely new things that completely change how we live and think. I do not argue that students should never store what they learn in their memories (either directly through concerted memorization or indirectly through repeated use). In fact, the act of reading itself requires readers to have readily available in memory all the structures of written language (sound-letter correspondences, key sight words, vocabulary, textual and genre conventions, etc.). Nor do I deny

that audio-visual materials are becoming an increasingly important and valuable means of self-education, although I remain skeptical that they will wholly replace written language for that purpose. (Indeed, as I argued at the beginning of the previous subsection, the audio-visual materials available on the Internet – such as mini-documentaries and demonstrative videos – presuppose and depend upon the ability to read, if for no other purpose than to search for and locate the desired resource.) As tools for self-education, memory and audio-visual technology can be just as important as written language – but that does not make them adequate replacements for written language. Rather, all three tools are interwoven in multiple, complex, creative ways in the activities of self-directed learners.

This discussion of memory and audio-visual materials leads to a caveat about the whole argument in this chapter. It may well be the case that there are other areas of learning *besides* reading that are equally necessary for enabling students to take control of their own educations – not to mention things that students should learn for non-libertarian reasons (cultural, economic, moral, etc.)²⁹. But a full discussion of all that should or could be included in the requirements for education is beyond the scope of this thesis. My goal is simply to show that reading, at least, should certainly be required for all students, and that we can justify this requirement on libertarian grounds because being able to read enables students to self-direct their learning in ways that non-readers cannot do.

One might wonder why I give precedence to reading, rather than treating reading and writing as equally necessary. It is hardly that I think writing is less valuable educationally than reading. The importance of learning to write is fully compatible with my argument in this thesis.

²⁹ As just one example, the agency-based approach to education that I take in this thesis provides no justification for working against children's self-centeredness, except insofar as individual agents always act in response to one another. We can surely find a more direct justification for actively developing social skills and altruism – but that justification is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Moreover, I believe that good practices for teaching reading and writing involve developing both sets of skills in tandem, rather than independently of each other; indeed, the methodologies for teaching reading that I discuss in Chapter Four would take an integrated approach to reading and writing. However, my argument in this thesis is *not* about writing; it is about reading. I seek to defend the educational necessity of reading in order to show that a libertarian education cannot allow *all* areas of learning to remain optional and dependent on students' preferences without compromising their ability to make informed choices about their own learning. A similar line of reasoning could very well be developed with respect to writing as well as reading, but it would require consideration of issues that are beyond the scope of this thesis³⁰.

More broadly, the ability to use language at all is even more fundamental for learning than the more specialized ability to use written language. Even in cultures that do not possess or greatly rely on written language, oral communication is surely essential for all teaching and learning. Moreover, if reading is necessary for so much later learning, oral language is necessary in order to learn to read in the first place. I agree with all of these claims. However, oral language and written language differ in this fundamental way: oral language is normally acquired automatically, without effort or adult coercion (except in cases of severe disability or deprivation). While it is true that some children acquire written language in a similarly effortless fashion (as the libertarian educators regularly remind us), the typical approach to early reading assumes that children will not learn to read incidentally in the course of their everyday lives (as they acquire oral language), but that they must be *taught* to read deliberately and that both teachers and students must set aside resources of

³⁰ Just a few of the questions that would have to be addressed in order to make the case for requiring all students to learn to write: How much should writing instruction emphasize norms of usage versus students' innovations and self-expressions? What variations of dialect, register, and genre should be accepted, encouraged, excluded? What writing technology should students use: paper and pencil or computer keyboard? And what about the use of increasingly effective speech-to-text conversion software? These are important issues for future work to consider.

time and effort specifically for the task of learning to read. A *requirement* that all children learn to speak would seem ludicrous, since most of them do so automatically and willingly. For the same reason, even as extreme a libertarian educator as Neill would never protest children's learning their first language³¹. But libertarian educators *would* take issue with the requirement that all children learn to read; for this reason it is necessary to show that such a requirement is justified, even *and especially* on libertarian principles.

3.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I first reviewed the libertarian educators' views on reading. Neill and Illich held a generally lax attitude toward its importance, viewing it as yet one more skill that students might *choose* to acquire — or, equally legitimately, choose *not* to. This precedent makes it necessary to argue that requiring children to learn to read is in fact essential for enabling them to exercise greater agency over their learning. In contrast to Neill and Illich, Holt recognized the importance of learning to read, and offered many valuable suggestions for teaching reading in a way that is more friendly toward students' agency. I return to these suggestions in Chapter Four.

I then discussed two ways of defining reading. The skills approach is a useful starting point but ultimately incomplete. We also need to recognize that the conventions of written language are social practices; accordingly, the ideas of agency and structure help us understand what it means to be able to read. Finally, I argued that students who can read are able to control their own educations more than students who cannot read, for the following reasons. Reading provides access to ways of learning that depend on written language, including Internet-based resources for self-teaching, interesting information and ideas that enrich and extend students' immediate experience, and modes of human thought that require written language (such as fiction and history).

³¹ In all likelihood the matter never even crossed Neill's mind, given that all Summerhill students arrived there after the age when children acquire most of the structures of oral language.

Reading also offers exposure to areas of learning that students may never have realized they were interested in. And it provides some protection against poor guidance on the part of the adults in students' lives. All students should be required to learn to read regardless of whether they ever actually exercise that ability in their pursuit of self-education, because the mere fact that they are able to read gives them greater choice in what and how they learn. Reading is certainly not sufficient for enabling students to be self-directed learners, but it is a necessary prerequisite for the very possibility of independent learning.

In this chapter I have been concerned to show that requiring all children to learn to read can be justified even from within libertarian educational theory. Parents, teachers, and makers of education policy have a great deal of control over the educational structures in which students find themselves — even when they *attempt* to let students define their own environments. Because it is more enabling of students' educational choices to require them to learn to read than to leave reading optional, those who seek to support students' educational agency and freedom — as libertarian educators do — should be particularly eager to ensure that such a requirement is in place. At the same time, there is much more to educational structures than whether or not everyone must learn to read. Accordingly, in the fourth and final chapter, I address some aspects of *how* we teach children to read. Even once the educational necessity of learning to read has been established, we can still do a lot to make students' experiences of acquiring reading *relatively* more agency-enabling.

Chapter Four: Freedom in Learning to Read

Thus far, I have provided an overview of libertarian educational theory as espoused by Neill, Holt, and Illich; presented the agency-within-structure model as a more nuanced account of human freedom (including educational freedom), in which structure and agency are both unavoidably present in all situations of human interaction; and argued that requiring all children to learn to read is a necessary constraint for enabling the very possibility of self-education. In this final chapter, I consider the *way* we teach children to read. Although constraint and freedom are not antithetical, the *nature* of some constraints (rather than their quantity) is more supportive of human agency, while other constraints needlessly restrict the scope of human action. Accordingly, in this chapter I consider *how* we might teach reading in order to support and develop children's control over their own learning. My goal is to offer a multilayered set of recommendations in order to illustrate how the vision of libertarian education that I develop in this thesis speaks to various levels of policy and practice. It is particularly important to do so in the current educational context, which has left fewer and fewer decisions in the hands of individual parents, teachers, and schools.

I begin by emphasizing the role of context in determining what kind of structures are truly freeing. For this reason, the recommendations I make in subsequent sections of this chapter must be seen as provisional; I argue (against current policy trends toward regulation and standardization at higher and higher levels) that the ultimate decisions regarding educational structures should be left to the judgment of parents and teachers – and, where possible, students themselves. I next explain several principles of reading instruction taken directly from the libertarian educators. Finally, I discuss two examples of methodologies – one actual, the other hypothetical – that I consider to be consistent with the goals of libertarian education as I have developed them in this thesis. These methodologies are themselves *structures* whose purpose is to promote the

development of students' *agency* in education. For this reason, they serve to further support the central claim of this thesis, that structure and constraint are inherent in human freedom.

4.1 The importance of context

This section is *both* a caveat for the rest of this discussion *and* one of the most important principles for teaching in a way that respects students' freedom. This principle is summarized by what has become a cliché in the social sciences: *context is key*. The invocation of context is sometimes used as an excuse to avoid more careful analysis, but there is much truth behind this cliché. In fact, the importance of context flows directly from the nature of human agency-within-structure. As I discussed in Chapter Two, structure forms the framework within which human action takes place: it provides the rules and resources that human actors use to interact with one another and their worlds. These rules and resources vary across time, space, and culture, and so the actions that humans are able to carry out vary along with them. At the same time, however, structure is always mediated and enacted by the beliefs and behaviors of individual actors. Thus, a structural principle (for example, sound-letter correspondences within an alphabetic written language) may be relatively homogeneous within a particular culture, but take on subtly or significantly different meanings when it is put into practice by different groups of actors, or by the same actors for different purposes.

For this reason, the nature of educational freedom – what structures enable students to exercise their agency – will necessarily look different in different educational settings, for different students within the same setting, or for the same student at different moments in his or her development. Accordingly, in this chapter I cannot offer universal rules or panaceas that can be applied to all children in all circumstances – indeed, the desire for educational cure-alls is inherently opposed to the fundamental spirit of libertarian educational theory (see especially Illich

1970: 1-2, 68-71, 104-116; as well as Neill 1992: 9, 134-141; Hart 1970: 87; and Holt 1976). I can only predict what structures are *likely* to help students grow in their abilities to control their own learning. The decisions about whether any of my suggestions apply to *specific* situations and children must be left to educators who have a much more intimate knowledge of those individual child agents and the structures they will find genuinely enabling.

However, even educators in contexts far removed from those with which I am most familiar can use the libertarian analysis that I develop here to help them make decisions about agency-enabling structures. In Chapter Two, I offered a modified definition of freedom as “the relative scope for action provided by one’s social contexts.” I then mentioned several questions we might ask to evaluate the freedom that agents experience within different contexts:

- *Breadth of agency*: What is the range of actions and choices available to participants in this context?
- *Depth of agency*: How meaningful or significant do the participants in this context perceive the available actions and choices to be?
- *Flexibility of rules*: Who is able to change the norms or standards of participation in this context, and how easily?
- *Access to resources*: Who has the means for participation in this context, how easily are they obtained, and how easily do they change hands?

I suggest that these questions provide a helpful starting point for examining structures in terms of participants’ freedom. Once again, the answers to these questions will certainly depend on the specific contexts and participants to which they are applied; moreover, by approaching the issue from multiple directions, asking these questions leads to a richer picture of participants’ true freedom. For example, participants in a given context might be able to carry out a certain action

(possessing *breadth of agency*), but might not value that action very highly (lacking *depth of agency*) — in fact, they might even find the structures that give them access to that action to be constraining in other ways. Thus, considering all of these questions together will allow educators to determine the specific areas in which their own students need greater freedom.

The agency-within-structure model of human freedom calls attention to the context-specific nature of freedom. A corollary of the importance of context must be noted briefly. In this thesis I focus exclusively on the freedom of *students*, setting aside *parents' and teachers'* freedom to make choices on behalf of the children in their direct care. An adequate discussion of this complex issue, including the relationship between children's rights and parents' freedom, is beyond the scope of this thesis. But the importance of context in determining what educational structures are freeing *does* provide a minimal argument for allowing decisions about educational policy to be made as locally as possible. Of course there are good reasons to make *some* policies universal; for example, in the previous chapter I argued that all children should be required to learn to read. I do not suggest that this policy requirement is context-specific³². Parents and teachers do not get to decide whether reading is required; by virtue of having children in their care, they are responsible for ensuring that those children do in fact learn to read. But when it comes to determining the specific structures that support children learning to read and growing in educational agency, such decisions should be left as much as possible in the hands of those who work most closely and regularly with the children themselves. Who is best able to discover what structures and constraints will be

³² With the exception that it does not apply to children in earlier societies, where resources for self-education depended less heavily on written language.

freeing for a particular child or group of children: someone who has actually met and interacted with those children, or someone who has not³³?

Furthermore, parents and teachers are not only able to *observe* the responses of individual children to various educational structures; they are also able to consult directly with the children themselves. By guiding children to explore various ways of learning and to reflect on the circumstances in which they are most free to learn, teachers and parents can further support children's developing control over their own educations. Of course, it is not always feasible to involve children directly in the process of decision-making. Some decisions (like the requirement to learn to read) are not optional, and parents and teachers must make other decision (often for practical reasons) before children even have the opportunity to think about and express their preferences. But if we never allow children to take part in making real choices that affect their lives and learning, we neglect to develop their ability to choose.

As Holt said, “[T]hese differences [that is, different structures that adults put in place with respect to the children in their care] make all the difference, and the difference they make varies much from one child to another” (Hart 1970: 87). If our goal is to support children's growth in educational freedom, and if freedom is as context-specific as I have here argued, then decisions about specific structures and policies can best be made by those who best know the children in question — including the children themselves.

³³ I do not mean to imply that teachers and parents *automatically* know how to create freeing educational structures for the children in their care. The ability to support children's agency develops through experience, and certainly benefits from the input of others. For more about the role that educational research and philosophy might play in supporting parents and teachers, see the conclusion to this thesis.

4.2 Some principles from the libertarian educators

The first recommendations for teaching reading that I discuss come directly from the libertarian educators themselves, particularly from John Holt. To be sure, I offer a somewhat modified justification for these recommendations; where the libertarian educators were concerned with students' absolute "freedom" to do whatever they wanted, I focus instead on their developing abilities to actively pursue education for themselves. But the libertarian educators were not always consistent in their view of freedom: Holt in particular has much to say about structures that support the kind of agency-derived freedom I advocate in this thesis. Therefore it is reasonable to incorporate his suggestions into this libertarian approach to teaching reading.

The principles that I discuss in this section apply to relatively high-level policies. They are primarily intended to set the limits of when and where formal instruction in reading is allowed or required. An individual teacher, school, or family *might* be able to implement some of these principles, if the district-, state-, and federal-level policies do not contradict that goal. But at present, many high-level policies prevent local educators from doing so. So policy changes would need to be made at those levels in order to make space for more libertarian policies and practices regarding learning to read. In subsequent sections I discuss structures that might be implemented within a single classroom, regardless of how restrictive higher-level policies are.

4.2.1 Respect, and research, self-taught readers

The first principle, which the libertarian educators insist on *repeatedly*, is that *some children can acquire reading without any formal instruction*. Two applications follow from this principle. To begin with, in whatever policies and structures we have, we ought to make space for self-taught readers. In Chapter Three I argued that all children should learn to read; I deliberately did *not* argue that all children should receive *formal instruction* in reading, or should even be *taught* to

read. For some children, reading is not “taught” so much as “caught.” They learn to read incidentally, through exposure to print-rich environments, informal teaching from the adults around them (including through shared read-alouds), and their own desire to be able to read for themselves. Libertarian structures for teaching reading interfere as little as possible with such children. Once children have demonstrated mastery of reading sufficient for further self-education (as discussed in Chapter Three), they should not be required to participate in the formal reading instruction that is available for other children — though they should of course receive continued access to adult guidance, books, and other resources for student-driven learning. The goal of a libertarian approach to teaching reading is for all children to be able to use written language to pursue learning; children should not be required to learn reading in a *particular* way, if they can show that another method (e.g. informal versus formal learning) enables them to achieve the educational benefits of being able to read (outlined in Chapter Three). Educational structures that refrain from holding back self-taught readers, while continuing to offer them other important educational resources, go a long way toward becoming more libertarian.

But we can do more than simply get out of the way: we can also view self-taught readers as an *asset*, as a way to increase our knowledge of how children learn to read. We ought to seek to discover what combination(s) of genetic, personal, and environmental factors contribute to enabling children to teach themselves to read, without formal instruction. I know of no mainstream educational research (i.e., not conducted by those actively involved in libertarian education or unschooling) regarding self-taught readers that is more recent than the 1960s (but see Goodman & Goodman 1963 and Gray 2010). Clearly, this is a phenomenon deserving considerable further research, from multiple perspectives and methodologies. Of course, the findings of such research might not be generalizable to other children, especially if it turns out that genetic and personal

characteristics play a larger role than environment. However, the *conventions* of written language are social and cultural; therefore, even “self-taught” readers must have *some* environmental inputs in order to learn the codes of written language. Holt suggests many ways that adults might make information about written language conventions available for children who are teaching themselves to read, without imposing on them more “help” than they desire or need (see 1967: 86-114, 1972: 224-233). We would do well to look into what adult assistance children genuinely find useful in their own efforts to learn to read, and under what circumstances. Such research on environmental supports for self-taught readers would benefit both those who acquire reading outside of school-based instruction and those who do not.

Moreover, further research on the prevalence and experiences of self-taught readers is important for yet another reason: to raise awareness that “reading without schooling” (Holt 1972: 217ff) can and does occur. The gifted and homeschooling communities are well aware that many children do not need formal instruction in order to acquire reading, but policy-makers and teacher education programs seem to ignore this fact. Increased awareness of the numbers and characteristics of self-taught readers, and of the ways adults can support them without interfering, would be another important step toward increasing the freedom of educational structures.

4.2.2 Do away with fear of failure

The libertarian educators also place great importance on a second principle: *fear of failure is particularly antithetical to both freedom and learning*. This applies to all students, whether they acquire reading formally or informally. In order to help students develop their educational agency, we must try to avoid making them feel that they cannot bear the consequences of mistakes (including social embarrassment, loss of privileges or access to opportunities, loss of approval and affection from valued adults and peers, etc.). We would never condone putting an adult learner in

a situation with such high-stakes consequences for failure, but we frequently do so with children. Yet there is no reason to suppose that children are less vulnerable than adults to the negative effects of fear of failure; thus, children as well as adults benefit from low-stakes learning environments, in which temporary “failures” do not have long-term, unbearable consequences, but are merely another opportunity for learning.

Of course, what counts as an “unbearable consequence of failure” will be highly dependent, not only on the classroom culture, but also on the individual learner. Some students require the pressure of impending deadlines and high-stakes consequences in order to motivate themselves to learn even something they find interesting, while others simply shut down under such pressure and refuse to learn anything. Moreover, age and experience can affect one’s perception of the consequences of failure. For this reason, we may have to make modifications to our educational structures that we adults would not perceive as necessary, but which enable students to feel that mistakes are an acceptable part of the learning process. For example, teachers and parents should look carefully at the ways they implicitly praise “correct” readings and look down on “mistakes” made by beginning readers (Holt 1967: 100). We may not even realize how we convey our approval or disapproval of students’ attempts, but we can be sure that the students themselves pick up on these subtle messages.

4.2.3 Have patience

One important way in which we might reduce the consequences of “failure” in learning to read is by *minimizing adult-made timetables for learning to read*. Children experience pressure to acquire reading “on time” both moment-by-moment and year-by-year. In the everyday course of reading instruction, children are often expected to produce the “right” answer almost immediately; if they fail to do so, they are rarely given opportunities to correct their mistakes, or even if they *are* asked

to try again, they know that the teacher and their fellow students have already seen them fail once. Holt shows (1967: 98-99) that when children are reading something meaningful and interesting, not merely something required as a school exercise, they often realize that what they have just read does not make sense and are able to correct themselves (see also Armbruster et al. 2009: 41-42). Fortunately, some schools do teach strategies for checking one's own comprehension while reading (Armbruster et al. 2009: 45-48). But Holt insists, "What we must remember about this ability of children to become aware of mistakes, to find and correct them, is that it takes time to work, and that under pressure and anxiety it does not work at all. But at school we almost never give it the time" (99-100). In order for children to learn how to self-correct, we must give them time to do so, time in which they are not afraid that their mistakes — which are inevitable for anyone who is beginning to exercise a new skill — will be exposed in the eyes of others. One way to give children this time is to allow them to read, or try to read, when no one — not even a teacher — is watching. "For teachers not only like right answers, they like them right away. If a child can't correct his mistake immediately, someone else will correct it for him" (100). If we want children to be free from fear of failure, we cannot always be correcting their errors in reading. We must allow some or even many errors to continue, perhaps even for a long time, until the child is able to recognize them for herself and correct them without feeling ashamed.

Children are not only expected to produce the "right" answer without time for self-correction in the moment-to-moment of reading instruction. They are also expected to acquire reading skills up to a certain specified level by a certain specified age. If a child fails to learn "on time" (according to a predetermined, adult-chosen definition), the consequences can be significant: remedial reading instruction takes the place of opportunities to learn other interesting things; the child is likely to be separated from her classmates for reading "intervention;" she feels the worry

and pressure of the adults around her that she may *never* acquire reading — and of course all of this only serves to make her fear failure all the more. Holt’s criticism of the “timetables” approach to reading is scathing:

Timetables! We act as if children were railroad trains running on a schedule. The railroad man figures that if his train is going to get to Chicago at a certain time, then it must arrive on time at every stop along the route. If it is ten minutes late getting into a station, he begins to worry. In the same way, we say that if children are going to know so much when they go to college, then they have to know this at the end of this grade, and that at the end of that grade. If a child doesn’t arrive at one of these intermediate stations when we think he should, we instantly assume that he is going to be late at the finish. But children are not railroad trains. They don’t learn at an even rate. They learn in spurts, and the more interested they are in what they are learning, the faster these spurts are likely to be. (1967: 107)

In the rest of this chapter I discuss ways we might structure reading instruction in order to help children become and stay interested in learning to read. But the libertarian principle is this: when children discover that reading is interesting (or worthwhile as a means to other things they find interesting), they *will* learn to do so, even if that is later than we adults would prefer. All the pressure we place on children to learn according to *our* timetables only serves to increase their fear of failure and decrease their ability to learn well. And this is especially so in the case of struggling or late readers.

Of course, there *may* be important developmental reasons for pushing children to acquire reading earlier rather than later. We know that some abilities, such as oral language, must be learned during a certain developmental period (called a “sensitive period”); attempting to acquire them later is much more difficult or even impossible. It could be the case that written language also has a sensitive period for acquisition. If this is so, then we should certainly be concerned about allowing children to wait too long before learning to read. But all of our mainstream educational research on reading acquisition has involved children who have been exposed to formal reading instruction from an early age (i.e., first grade or even younger). The anecdotal evidence of

unschooled children, such as the stories told by the libertarian educators, suggests that written language *can* be acquired at later ages without too great difficulty; the achievements of adult learners under appropriate circumstances reinforce this claim. But we can never know whether greater numbers of children in more diverse situations would be equally able to learn to read on their own timetables unless we give them time to do so.

As an example of a policy that would preserve the requirement that all children acquire reading (argued for in Chapter Three), while still allowing children to do so in their own way and at their own pace, we might delay requiring children to participate in formal reading instruction until the age of ten, twelve, or even fifteen. At that time, we could administer a test of reading ability; children who had managed to learn to read without formal teaching would be free to continue learning other things as they desired, and those that still could not read (if indeed there were any) would receive the instruction necessary to enable them to use reading for their own educational purposes, perhaps using one of the methodologies outlined below. Of course, there are still many issues with such a policy: in addition to investigating the possibility of a sensitive period for acquiring reading (discussed above), we should also question the assumptions that we can devise a universally applicable reading assessment, that we can measure something as social as reading on an individual basis, and that children who receive mandatory reading instruction at a later age will be able to “catch up” either academically or socially to their self-taught peers. Despite these concerns, I mention this hypothetical policy merely to illustrate that requiring all children to learn to read does not entail requiring them to attend age-graded, curriculum-driven schools for most of their childhoods. We can devise other, more creative structures for ensuring that students are able to learn through reading.

To summarize, even though the libertarian educators held a different view of educational freedom than the one I propose in this thesis, several of their principles — especially those of John Holt — are helpful for considering how we might teach reading in a way that respects and enables children’s agency. First, some children learn to read without formal instruction. A libertarian approach gets out of the way of such children, giving them whatever help they request but not requiring them to participate in formal instruction that they do not need; moreover, a libertarian approach views self-taught readers as an asset, worth studying in order to learn more about how children acquire reading. Second, fear of failure is one of the greatest hindrances to educational freedom. Determining what factors contribute to children’s fear of failure will require careful consideration of individual children and educational settings. And third, imposing timetables on children who are learning to read is unnecessary and often unhelpful. Children need time, both moment-to-moment in order to realize and correct their mistakes without fear of being shamed before others, and year-by-year to discover for themselves that reading is both worthwhile and enjoyable. All of these principles need to be verified by extensive quantitative and qualitative research; but they should serve as a guide for further research.

These principles, derived from the libertarian educators, apply to high-level policies regarding *which* children are required to participate in formal reading instruction and remedial interventions, and *when* — but not *how* that teaching is structured. Individual teachers and parents may have limited control over the *who* and the *when*, but they can still make the educational experiences of the children in their care relatively more free through *how* they teach reading. In the rest of this chapter, I discuss two examples of specific methodologies that teachers might consider using *within* the classroom to make their reading instruction more libertarian.

4.3 Methodology #1: The Daily 5

The first example methodology I discuss, the Daily 5, is a well-known way of structuring literacy periods in the elementary grades³⁴. The Daily 5 has the following goals: to increase the amount of time students spend on meaningful reading and writing tasks, rather than unconnected worksheets or busywork; to give students greater choice and independence in how they spend their literacy time, while maintaining high expectations regarding appropriate behavior during that time; and to free students from reliance on teachers to manage their behavior, thereby also freeing teachers to give focused instruction one-on-one and in small groups.

4.3.1 Structured choices in the Daily 5

Both structure and choice pervade the Daily 5 methodology. Students are not immediately given total control over their time and activities; rather, teachers first take their classes through ten very specific steps (the “10 Steps to Teaching and Learning Independence,” Boushey and Moser 2014: 36ff) so that students know *exactly* what appropriate, on-task behavior looks, sounds, and feels like. As part of these ten steps, the nature, purpose, and importance of each task is clearly explained, and students are given extensive practice with the task. In some ways this preparation is very constraining, even rigid. But by making expectations clear and achievable, students’ minds and agency are respected: they are not treated as unthinking automatons to be trained in “correct” behavior, but as agents who are able to understand why some behaviors are more helpful than

³⁴ In this section I discuss the methodology as described by its creators, longtime elementary school teachers Gail Boushey and Joan Moser. Whether all the teachers who use the Daily 5 implement the methodology as it was originally intended is a matter for empirical research. Moreover, the creators acknowledge, “the Daily 5 is not a prescriptive program to be followed blindly, the same way each day, month, and year. Instead, we as educators need to respond and react to the diverse needs of our own students” (Boushey & Moser 2014: 18). For simplicity’s sake, I stick to the methodology as described by the creators, rather than considering its many possible permutations; this is sufficient to demonstrate my point, that the constraints of this methodology meaningfully support and enable students’ agency in learning to read.

others. In this way, students are prepared to discern and choose the behaviors that best support their own learning.

Once teachers decide that students understand why some behaviors are more desirable than others and can perform the task appropriately with a reasonable level of consistency, they begin to introduce choices the students may make. Even these choices are highly structured. For example, almost the very first lesson of the Daily 5 is “3 Ways to Read a Book.” Students are taught that they can “read the pictures,” “read the words,” or “retell the story” (Boushey & Moser 2014: 68). Of course, depending on the kind of book and the reader’s purpose, there are actually *countless* ways to read a book; in addition, skillful readers usually combine two or more of the three ways identified in the Daily 5. However, this clear and simple structure offers a choice that is both meaningful and manageable. Just as important, by legitimating multiple ways of reading, this structure enables even very young children, struggling readers, and non-English speakers to participate in reading. Over time, their ability to read the words *and* the pictures will grow, and they will add other ways of reading as well.

Students are gradually given structured choices in other areas besides *how* they read. They are eventually allowed to choose *where* in the classroom they do their reading and writing work. This too does not happen right away: first, teachers deliberately send different students to particular parts of the room. As students experience the locations available to them for reading and writing, teachers regularly encourage them to actively consider the merits of each location: they tell students to ask themselves, “Is this a place where I and others can be successful?” (2014: 44). Once students have been exposed to all the possibilities and have had opportunities to think carefully about where they work best, they are allowed to make the choice of location for themselves.

A third important choice given to students is *what* they read. Once again, the Daily 5 presents a clear structure for how students should make this choice, called “I PICK Good-Fit Books” (2014: 74ff):

I select a book and look it over, inside and out.
Purpose: Why might I want to read it?
Interest: Does it interest me?
Comprehend: Do I understand what I am reading?
Know: Do I know most of the words?

Unlike other book-selection methods, I PICK does not only consider students’ level of reading achievement; it also incorporates their interests and purposes, *why* they want to read. In addition, it does not rely on number or color codes to guide students to the “right” books. Rather, it teaches them how to choose books *for themselves*, so that they are able to do so even in settings (such as their own homes, bookstores, or the library) that do not use the same leveling system as the classroom. In these ways, the Daily 5 again honors children’s minds and desires, teaching them to be active and independent in their book selection.

Finally, perhaps the most important choice that the Daily 5 gives students is *when* they complete their reading and writing tasks. The “5” of the Daily 5 are the following tasks: Read to Self, Work on Writing, Read to Someone, Listen to Reading, and Word Work (i.e., spelling practice). These tasks are introduced one at a time; for each task, teachers take their classes through the ten steps to independence to give students a clear understanding of what to do and plenty of practice in doing it. Once students have demonstrated mastery of the first two tasks, Read to Self and Work on Writing, teachers allow each student to choose in what order he or she will do the required tasks. As each new task is mastered, it is added to the options that students can choose. Teachers record each student’s choice to ensure that every student completes all the tasks at some point during the week. (Read to Self and Work on Writing must be chosen at some point

each day.) The choice of order is a representative example of how the Daily 5 methodology gives students meaningful choice within structure, ensuring both that they have ample opportunities to develop as readers and writers and that they can exercise their agency in doing so.

4.3.2 Libertarian evaluation of the Daily 5

Many aspects of the Daily 5 are non-negotiable; students are expected to work independently on reading and writing tasks throughout the literacy period, and to do so in a productive manner without disturbing other students. As in most social settings, a large number of activities are not permitted: daydreaming, singing, running around in circles, eating, talking to a friend, practicing embroidery, and so on. Yet students *do* have choices in the areas discussed above: they control what, when, where, and how they complete the required literacy tasks. Boushey and Moser, the creators of the Daily 5, report,

Even though [Read to Self and Work on Writing] are non-negotiable, students enjoy the freedom to choose the order in which they will participate in each activity.... Choice is one of the key reasons that students love the Daily 5, develop the habits of readers, and greatly improve their reading. (2014: 16)

Their experience matches that of Holt, who reflected, “I don’t think the children felt that the class was basically like the ones they had been used to, or that their choices were not real because not unlimited” (1972: 88-89).

Of course, Neill would reject the highly structured Daily 5 methodology as all-too-constraining of children’s freedom. He would not be persuaded by the evidence that children appreciate the opportunity to make even limited choices; limited choice may be preferable to no choice at all, but only for those who have not experienced “true” (i.e., Summerhillian) freedom. If children could really do whatever they wanted, he would argue, they would not submit so willingly to the structure of the Daily 5! Yet I have argued in the second and third chapters of this thesis that structure and constraint are inherent in every educational setting, even one as seemingly free as

Summerhill, and that certain constraints (including the requirement that all children learn to read) must be imposed in order to meet the libertarian goal of supporting independent learners. The nature and purpose of the constraints in question, *not* the presence or absence of constraint determines whether an educational structure is agency-friendly or not.

The particular constraints of the Daily 5 come from two sources: the need to ensure that all children acquire reading, and the need to keep a certain group of children (determined by age) engaged in reading-related activities within a certain space (the classroom) during a certain time (the daily literacy period). In Chapter Three I argued that the first of these reasons is consistent with the libertarian educators' concern for giving students control over their own learning; therefore, any constraints directly entailed by the requirement of learning to read are legitimate even within a libertarian education. Neill would likely reject even this reason for constraining children's activities; in contrast, Holt and Illich would recognize the close connection between reading and educational independence, and so would accept constraints that derive from the necessity of reading. In contrast, they would strongly protest that children do not need to be confined to a classroom in order to learn to read. As the previous section implies, I am sympathetic to this view, and I urge educational policy-makers to allow and even to encourage creative alternatives to mandatory, age-graded schooling. Yet classroom teachers often do not have control over these policy matters: they are assigned a group of children, usually brought together by age more than by similar abilities or interests, and are expected to keep them all engaged in learning to read and write — no matter whether some of them already know how to and others are not yet ready to learn. Within these limitations, the structures of the Daily 5 methodology approach Illich's convivial institutions: they constrain in order to enable students' choices regarding their own process of learning to read.

However, I *would* suggest two slight alterations — one practical, one theoretical — to the Daily 5 methodology in order to bring it more in line with libertarian educational theory, as I have developed it in this thesis. The practical one has to do with the relatively brief “focus lessons” given to the whole group. Daily 5 teachers “decide the skill and strategy most of [their] children need and teach it during one of the focus lessons” (Boushey & Moser 2014: 18). These lessons are no more than ten minutes long; more specialized instruction is reserved for small groups and individual conferences. However, in most classes, at least a few children either have already mastered the “skill and strategy” being taught to the whole group, or else are not yet prepared to learn it effectively. It would take considerable ingenuity to modify the structures of the Daily 5 so as to permit children to skip whole-group lessons that were not appropriate for their own needs as learners, without singling out some children as “special” (in either a good way or a bad way).³⁵ But this problem merits creative problem-solving attention: we should not be satisfied by providing a measure of freedom in learning to only *most* children, not *all*.³⁶

Theoretically, the creators of the Daily 5 state, “the opportunity to choose has to be *earned* and occurs only after instruction and practice” (Boushey & Moser 2014: 25, emphasis added). I modify this statement: as human agents, children already continually make choices within the

³⁵ I do not suggest a definite alternative to whole-group focus lessons because different teachers will need to deal with this situation in different ways, depending on the classroom climate (i.e., how likely children are to feel privileged or ostracized for being permitted to skip whole-group lessons), the needs of the children in their care (i.e., finding a creative alternative may be a higher priority if a few specific children would not benefit from most of the whole-group lessons than if most of the children do not need one or two of them at some point over the course of an entire year), and the curricular constraints imposed on teachers from above (i.e., some teachers may be required to teach certain topics and skills to all, regardless of the needs of individual students).

³⁶ One might object that ensuring the educational freedom of certain children *requires* placing relative limitations on the freedom of others — i.e., the children who do benefit from the whole-group lesson need the participation of those who do not. When faced with such a trade-off, the argument would go, then we should prioritize the freedom of those who have fewer advantages overall. Yet I simply do not believe this trade-off is unresolvable — hence the call for careful and creative thought on this issue.

structures they find around themselves (as I argued in Chapter Two). The Daily 5 methodology does not bestow the ability to choose upon children; such language implies that choice is a gift that can be taken away at the whim of those in power (i.e., teachers and educational policy-makers). Rather, the Daily 5 methodology *recognizes* the agency children already possess and *supports* their active participation in the classroom and in learning by providing clearly-structured choices, explaining classroom expectations, and giving ample opportunities to make choices and to practice appropriate behavior. In this recognition of and support for children's agency, Daily 5 classrooms contrast sharply with more traditional classrooms that are relatively hostile to students' choices. But they do not magically grant children the power to choose; they merely provide structures that enable children to choose *well* (by the standards of the classroom and of learning). This theoretical shift is subtle and need not affect the actual implementation of the Daily 5 in elementary classrooms, but it is important to mention in order to clarify my model of educational freedom.

Bearing in mind these minor considerations and the larger policy context that students are required to be present and active in their age-graded classrooms, overall I consider the Daily 5 methodology to be a good example of what a libertarian approach to teaching reading might look like. Importantly, this methodology is motivated by *both* respect for student agency and choice *and* concern for reading achievement; in this way it combines the libertarian educational theory discussed in Chapter One with the necessity of reading argued for in Chapter Three. In the next section, I describe another way we might consider structuring reading instruction so as to enable and support children's agency.

4.4 Methodology #2: The reading classroom as “participatory culture”

The second example methodology that I analyze is the classroom as a “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2009). To my knowledge, no one has yet used Jenkins' concept of participatory culture as

a basis for a primary reading program. So, unlike with the *Daily 5*, I cannot draw on a methodology developed by practicing teachers. Instead, this section is my own thought experiment in attempting to answer the question, “How would we have to structure the reading classroom in order to help children see reading as a culture that they desire to and are able to participate in?”

Before I begin to answer this question, we must note that the concept of participatory culture developed out of Jenkins’ research on “new media literacies.” Unlike some writers who “assume that communicating through visual, digital, or audio-visual media will displace reading and writing,” Jenkins is quick to argue the opposite: “textual literacy remains a central skill in the twenty-first century.” However, he then claims, “Before students can engage with the new participatory culture, they must be able to read and write.” He says no more about the relationship between the two than that “[i]n some ways... the new digital cultures provide support systems to help youths improve their core competencies as readers and writers” (2009: 28-29). He seems not to recognize that the five characteristics of participatory culture might provide an effective structure for learning to read and write just as much as for acquiring “digital” or “twenty-first century” literacies, or that formal educational institutions might be able to learn from the educational model of participatory culture. Accordingly, in this section I take a first step at imagining what a classroom participatory culture might look like.

Recall the five characteristics of participatory culture:

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement
2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others
3. Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices
4. Members who believe that their contributions matter
5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created) (Jenkins 2009: 5-6)

In Chapter Two I analyzed these characteristics as enabling-and-constraining structures, the rules and resources of cultural participation. I now apply these characteristics to the specific context of a primary reading classroom, asking the question, What structures would we need to establish in order for reading instruction in an elementary classroom to have these characteristics, that is, for it to be a participatory culture?

4.4.1 The first characteristic: low barriers

First, in order to guarantee “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement,” we would need to allow and encourage students to read at multiple levels and in multiple ways. It should not be implied, for instance, that children cannot read “real books” until they have reached some predetermined level of phonics mastery, or that they cannot be given chapter books until they have “graduated” from easy readers. Likewise, children should be allowed to read materials that are “easier” than they are capable of reading. Holt tells the story of a fifth grader who took seriously his pronouncement that the students could read *whatever* they wanted. She spent the first few weeks of the school year reading Dr. Seuss-level books, before (at Holt’s suggestion) turning to a much more difficult book on a topic she was deeply interested in (Holt 1972: 85-86). Perhaps, by lowering the barriers of what was acceptable reading for a fifth grader, Holt gave this girl a space in which she was free from fear of reading failure — and so free to read.

The Daily 5 structure already makes a good step in the direction of lowering barriers to participation, by emphasizing that “reading the pictures” and “retelling the story” are just as acceptable ways of reading as “reading the words.” It also actively teaches children how to choose appropriate books; however, the concept of “good-fit books” *might* itself become a barrier if it is treated as a stagnant category, rather than a flexible rule-of-thumb that might shift according to the reader’s purposes and interests. A beginning reader who wants strongly enough to read the *Harry*

Potter series will find a way to do so, given the right supports³⁷; similarly, a “high-ability” child who is interested in sharks may benefit from reading simple picture books and magazines about her topic of interest *as well as* more complex material. I do not argue *against* teaching children how to recognize a book’s difficulty and judge whether they will be able to sustain interest in it; as I said in the previous section, instruction in book choice is an important structure for supporting students’ developing control over their own reading. However, once they have been taught a method for choosing appropriate reading materials, they still should not be prevented from reading something they find interesting just because it does not *look* like a “good-fit book.” A child’s reading “level,” however determined, should never be made a barrier to her reading what she wants to read, whether too “easy” or too “hard.”

Another way we might lower barriers to participation in the culture of reading is by accepting and modeling, not only multiple *levels* and *ways* of reading, but also multiple *purposes* for reading. Elementary classrooms often emphasize reading for pleasure. Most of the books featured in these settings are fiction: silly stories, tall tales, fables, etc. I am certainly not opposed to reading for pleasure! It is a highly effective way to improve reading ability, as well as an important source of human enjoyment in its own right. But the ability to read has many other applications besides entertainment, and the classroom participatory culture should encourage readers to explore other possible purposes for reading. Some schools have invited adults in various professions as guest speakers to talk about how they use mathematics on the job each day. We might try a similar program with reading: What does an electrical engineer read? A costume designer? A film director? A herpetologist? The goal of such a program should not be to foster a

³⁷ One important support for students who want to read “difficult” books is audio recordings of books at many different “reading levels,” including those high above the official grade of the classroom.

wholly utilitarian attitude toward reading. In fact, to guard against such an unwanted result, we might also have guests speak about the role of reading in their personal lives. A student's grandmother could tell about how she exchanged letters with her long-distance fiancé, and an uncle might share the blogs he reads to help him plan his next fishing trip. By painting these living, human portraits of multiple and varied purposes for reading, we indicate to children that reading is a culture in which they too can participate.

4.4.2 The second characteristic: strong support for creation

The second characteristic of participatory culture, “strong support for creating and sharing creations with others,” may be the most difficult to apply directly to the teaching of *reading* (as distinct from writing). Too often we consider *writing* alone to be the creative process and *reading* to be the passive consumption of others' creations. But as I argued in the previous chapter, reading too requires the active creation of meaning from the written text. Thus, for the reading classroom to become a participatory culture, it must give children opportunities to share the meanings they create as they read. There are multiple ways to do this: paired readings or reading circles, where two or more students read and discuss the same text; reading journals, which students can use to share their responses with each other; book talks *by students*, which would enable students to explain why they enjoyed a particular book and to recommend it to their peers; and so on. As I have repeated throughout this chapter, the specific structures will have to be chosen by teachers themselves to meet the particular needs of their own classrooms. What I offer here are merely suggestions to show that it *is* possible to construct the act of reading, as well as writing, as a creative process worth sharing with others.

4.4.3 The third characteristic: informal mentorship

If “strong support for creating and sharing creations with others” is the most difficult to apply to reading pedagogy, the third characteristic may be the easiest to introduce structurally into the classroom. Teachers can allow and encourage “some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” in countless ways: higher-ability students could mentor lower-ability students within the same classroom, students from older grades could read with and to younger students, or reading partners or circles (as mentioned above) could mentor each other. The ideal, of course, would be for each student to be empowered to teach every other: Student A might be able to help Student B sound out a word today, and Student B might remind Student A to use context clues to figure out difficult vocabulary tomorrow.

Depending on the preferences of students and teacher, such mentorships could be more or less official, more or less flexible, more or less temporary, more or less comprehensive (for instance, a student might have the same mentor for all aspects of reading; or she might have a different mentor for spelling, vocabulary, reading responses, etc.). Perhaps, as with the Daily 5, it would be best to introduce relatively official and rigid mentor-mentee relationships, and gradually allow them to become more unofficial and flexible as students become more comfortable with the idea of helping each other participate as readers.

Of course, student-to-student mentorship in the reading classroom does not replace the teacher’s role as a primary mentor for all the children in the classroom. I have argued in previous chapters for the importance of a caring adult who can provide individualized guidance and exposure for students. The involvement of such an adult mentor in the child’s life is an indispensable structure for enabling the child’s developing agency, not least of all by offering long-term stability as the child gradually becomes less dependent. Student mentors can never give each other the same degree of guidance, exposure, and stability as adults (both teachers and parents).

However, one key way that *classroom* teachers in particular can provide both guidance and exposure to the children in their care is by enabling children to mentor each other. One child probably has less knowledge of the world than one adult (especially if that adult is sufficiently well-educated to be a teacher); but a classroom full of children are likely to be able to suggest things for their fellow students to learn and do that one teacher alone would never have thought of or even known about. Similarly, one teacher cannot possibly provide all the guidance (in choosing books, sounding out words, understanding genre conventions, etc.) that a classroom full of active readers need. Thus, teachers partially fulfill their obligations to offer exposure and guidance *by* empowering students to share their knowledge and skills with one another.

It must be acknowledged that student-to-student mentoring relationships (and those between students and adults, for that matter) are significantly constraining. Mentorships, like all relationships, require a certain amount of time, effort, and shared expectations in order to succeed. Both the willingness and the ability to work together do not come into being instantaneously; as the relationship develops over time (both calendar time and significant moments spent together), the partners grow to trust one another more. Mutually shared expectations for the relationship are also essential: if one person expects to be able to drop the mentorship and pick it up again at will, but the other is looking for a close, long-term partnership, the relationship will simply fall apart. These constraining structures are present in any relationship. We should not suppose that official, rigid, long-term mentoring relationships are more constraining than informal, flexible, momentary ones. As I have emphasized throughout this thesis, we would in no way improve these relationships by eliminating the constraints present in them; on the contrary, it is the very fact of constraints that enables mentoring relationships to be successful.

4.4.4 The fourth and fifth characteristics: reading as a social activity

The suggestions I have made so far – lowering barriers to what “counts” as acceptable reading, providing platforms for students to share their interpretations of what they read, and empowering students to mentor one another formally and informally – all underscore one vital truth: if the primary reading classroom is to become a participatory culture, it can no longer view reading as an exclusively individual activity. In the hypothetical classroom I have described, children of different ages and abilities are reading to and with each other; even when they are reading quietly to themselves they are jumping up and running across the room to ask each other for help or to share what they think about their reading; and they are constantly reflecting on ways that reading enables them to connect with other people whom they value – whether for the stories they can tell, the knowledge they can share, or simply the close relationship that exists between them. By turning reading into a social activity, we go a long way towards achieving the other two characteristics of participatory culture: “members who believe that their contributions matter” and “members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created).” The purpose of all these structures is to help children see reading as a creative-and-conventional way of communicating with others whose information, wisdom, and relationships they desire. In this way, we support their growing agency as readers and enable them to take control of their reading and, ultimately, of their learning.

4.4.5 Further considerations

Before ending this discussion of the reading classroom as a participatory culture, I should make several notes about what I am *not* advocating. First, the fact that I have de-emphasized explicit instruction in the basic skills and rules needed to make meaning with written language does not mean that I think such instruction has no place in an agency-friendly reading program. Some basic

instruction in phonics and vocabulary should still be made available to students, whether it comes directly from the teacher or from another student serving as a mentor. Providing this instruction comes under the characteristic of “strong support for creativity,” in that knowing (for example) the sounds of letters is necessary in order to be able to (actively, creatively, and purposefully) *make* meaning from print. In a more prototypical example of participatory culture, novice video gamers must still be shown how to hold the controller and which buttons to push to control their characters. But this teaching occurs in a meaningful social context and for the purpose of helping the gamer (or reader) do something she finds valuable; thus, like Illich’s convivial institutions, instruction in the basics of gameplay or written language constrains only in order to enable.

Second, by suggesting that formal educational institutions (i.e., schools) can model themselves after participatory cultures, I do not advocate that schools should try to “take over” from informal participatory cultures. This would hardly be consistent with libertarian educational theory! Informal, unofficial learning communities are valuable in and of themselves; they should not need to be appropriated by schools in order to be seen as “legitimate.” Rather, schools and participatory cultures can continue to exist side by side, neither overthrowing the other but each learning from the successes and struggles of the other. Just as (I argue) schools can learn a great deal about active, involved learning by considering the nature of participatory culture, so also participatory cultures have much to learn from mainstream educational research about child development, the psychology of learning, and effective teaching methods. Furthermore, by attending to the differences between participatory cultures and schools, each can come to recognize and appreciate what the other does well.

Finally, although I have presented the Daily 5 and participatory culture as two separate methodologies for teaching reading, I do not mean to suggest that teachers must choose to

structure their reading classrooms *either* as a participatory culture *or* according to the Daily Five. The two are in many ways compatible, and indeed there is considerable overlap between them. To be sure, they differ in their respective emphases. The Daily Five focuses on the *individual* in order to develop *independence* in reading and learning, while participatory culture directs our attention to the *social* in order to promote *interdependence*. Yet these two emphases are in fact complimentary: by combining principles and structures from *both* the Daily 5 *and* participatory culture, we can develop a hybrid methodology³⁸ more closely reflecting the claim that human action is always both rooted in the individual agent and shaped by social structures, as I argued in Chapter Two. Thus, classroom teachers should feel free to appropriate from both methodologies (and any others) the structures most suited to supporting the agency of their own students. Moreover, the fact that there are at least two recognized educational structures designed to develop students' emerging abilities to self-educate suggests that this thesis is on the right track: structure and constraint are not antithetical to freedom and agency, but can in fact be the very resources necessary for freedom.

4.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have sought to show that it is possible to make learning to read necessary, not optional, for all children – while still respecting their agency within educational structures. I began by explaining that the nature of agency leads to the importance of context in determining what structures are freeing for different children in different circumstances. This provides a partial

³⁸ Here is just one suggestion of how this might be done: The literacy period is split into two parts. During the first part, children are supposed to work independently, reading and writing the best they can on their own (as in the Daily 5). During the second part, informal mentorships are permitted and encouraged (as in participatory culture). To be sure, this structure would be complicated to implement, and might only serve to confuse younger students. But if successful, it would have the added benefit of respecting the freedom, at different parts of the day, *both* of students who thrive on social and collaborative learning *and* of those who enjoy reading as a form of self-directed learning and healthy solitude.

justification for allowing specific policy decisions to be made as locally as possible, by parents and teachers who are able to work directly with individual children to discover the conditions in which they are most free to learn. I next discussed several principles the libertarian educators give us that can help shape policy at all levels: a libertarian approach to teaching reading is characterized by respect for and research interest in those children who do not need formal teaching in order to acquire reading, by low-stakes opportunities to try out reading where learners are free from fear of failure, and by patience with those who may not master the skills of reading on adult timetables.

However, I recognize that parents and classroom teachers may have little ability to act on such libertarian principles, especially where current higher-level policies contradict the goal of respecting students' freedom in learning to read. For this reason, I also surveyed two examples of methodologies for structuring reading classrooms, the Daily Five and participatory culture. It must be emphasized that neither of these is as libertarian as Neill, Holt, and Illich would desire. They impose requirements on children that the libertarian educators would consider unacceptable – in particular, mandatory school attendance based on age and learning through a curriculum they have little or no part in developing. But throughout this thesis I have sought to demonstrate that *relative* freedom is a worthwhile, reasonable, and achievable goal. Classroom teachers cannot change the policies requiring children to attend school and teachers to deliver a certain curriculum (including that determined by standardized tests). But, by developing classroom structures that support children's agency, by constraining their students only in order to enable them to "tak[e] control of their own learning" (Illich 1970: 8), teachers can deliver to their students an educational freedom that is consistent with the spirit, if not the letter, of libertarian educational theory.

Conclusion: Hopeful Education

The final chapter of Illich's *Deschooling Society* is an essay entitled "Rebirth of Epimethean Man," in which Illich presents his distinction between expectation and hope. When I first read this chapter, it seemed a non sequitur to the rest of the book. The tone of the essay is at once more forward-looking and more pessimistic. But on closer inspection, I discovered that this final essay clarifies and unifies the social critique of the entire book. Moreover, the idea of hope (as Illich uses the term) relates directly to both libertarian education and agency, and so it serves as a fitting conclusion to this thesis.

Illich uses the Greek myth of Pandora, Prometheus, and Epimetheus as a metaphor for the problems he sees in contemporary society. He translates the name Pandora as "All-Giver" (1970: 105, 106); according to the myth as Illich retells it, she is the source of both ills and hope in the world. In contrast to the gift-giving Pandora, Prometheus stole fire from the gods, and thereby "turned facts into problems, called necessity into question, and defied fate" (107). He told his brother Epimetheus to "leave Pandora alone," but the latter married her (106). Illich claims that the history of the modern West is "the history of fading hope and rising expectations" (105), the rise of what he calls "the Promethean fallacy" — the "belief that a planned process of treatment ultimately gives results desired by the recipient" (114). He argues,

[W]e must rediscover the distinction between hope and expectation. Hope, in its strong sense, means trusting faith in the goodness of nature, while expectation, as I will use it here, means reliance on results which are planned and controlled by man. Hope centers desire on a person from who we await a gift. Expectation looks forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will produce what we have the right to claim. (105)

The point is not to question the effectiveness of processes. On the contrary, Illich readily acknowledges just how effective modern processes can be — effective at delivering values that can be proceduralized. The problem is not that we need to develop *better* processes, but rather that we

have become convinced that *all* problems can be solved by developing a better process. “Since there is nothing desirable which has not been planned, the city child soon concludes that we will always be able to design an institution for our every want. He takes for granted the power of process to create value” (108). Yet, Illich insists, some values *cannot* be guaranteed by a process. Specifically, when we rely on planned procedures rather than “personal good will,” we neglect to leave room for “the classical mode of drama, the style of tragedy, the logic of personal endeavor [i.e., agency] and rebellion” (111). He ends the chapter with a call for: “those who value hope above expectations... those who love people more than products... those who love the earth on which each can meet the other” (115). He names such people “Epimethean men” (116) to emphasize the contrast between them and those who, like Prometheus, rely on technological solutions for all life’s troubles. Rather than propose a process for ridding society of its dependence on process, Illich instead places his hope in “these hopeful brothers and sisters.”

The conception of agency-within-structure that I presented in Chapter Two of this thesis supports Illich’s distinction between expectation from a process and hope in a person. Human agents do not obey structural forces in the deterministic way that particles obey the laws of physics.³⁹ Rather, they act of themselves in response to the social worlds they encounter. Though agency is shaped and constrained to a large degree by structure, that same structure enables agents to choose their own course of action. If this model of human social action is sound, then *any* time we try to change human beings (as we do continually in education), we cannot *expect* adequate solutions from increasingly “effective” processes. Instead, we must *hope* in the choices and actions of individual persons.

³⁹ For more about the contrast between the natural and social sciences — i.e., between fields that study non-agentive and agentive beings — see Giddens 1984, especially xxxii-xxxv.

Educationally, this means that the search for a panacea — a single, generalizable technique that will reliably produce the same outcomes in all students — can never be fully realized. No matter the approach to education, some students will always respond “well” (by the criteria of the school system) and others will not. This does not mean that our teaching methods, assessments, curricula and so on continue to fall short of some perfect standard of effectiveness that we must keep striving to achieve; rather, it means there is no such thing as one set of educational “best practices” that can be generalized to all students.

Even libertarian educational theory cannot be considered the one cure for schools’ and students’ problems. In this, Neill was actually *overly* committed to his philosophy of radical non-interventionism (1992: 9), as the story of Winifred’s request for guidance (126-127) illustrates. Recall Holt’s response to Neill with respect to the many reasons one might tell a child to go to bed (or not): “these differences make all the difference, and the difference they make varies much from one child to another” (Hart 1970: 87). Holt was willing to be much more individual in his interactions with children than Neill was. No matter how firmly libertarian educators believe in allowing children to learn at their own pace and in their own way, they must be willing to do otherwise when the choices of individual children run into the limits of legitimate matters of choice.

I argued in Chapter Three that reading is one area where libertarian educators are justified in *requiring* students to learn something. If the ability to read has a fundamental relationship to self-directed learning, as I claim it does, then a libertarian principle (allowing children to learn *only* what they are interested in at the moment) may fail to achieve a libertarian goal (supporting children’s educational agency). To put it more positively, requiring all children to learn to read is a constraint that in turn enables them to control their own education. Yet even *reading* is no educational panacea. For some children, other areas of learning — such as playing a musical

instrument or designing websites — may open more doors in education and in life than reading does. Some children may learn to read and yet encounter other obstacles to taking control of their own learning⁴⁰. And some children may even perceive their educational agency to be unacceptably restricted by the requirement to learn to read, despite our best efforts to teach reading in a libertarian manner (as outlined in Chapter Four).

Where does all of this leave us? If educational paths and outcomes are as individual as each learner — indeed, as individual as the continually evolving and inherently unpredictable choices of each learner — does that mean that our continuing efforts to improve education are doomed to failure? In one sense, I think this is correct. No matter what educational processes we apply, no matter what educational structures we devise, and no matter how we define “success,” some students may still “fail” (Burbules 1990).⁴¹ Their outcomes (as well as those of “successful” students) are caused *both* by the educational structures around them *and* by their agentic choices. No amount of educational research, teacher training, or philosophizing can remove the factor of students’ own, individual responses. A student-proof education is not possible — nor should it be.

Yet there is more to be said. Illich urged us neither to expect guaranteed results from technical processes nor to despair altogether, but to hope in persons. And the “persons” relevant to the educational endeavor must include not only learners but also educators — parents, teachers, coaches, undergraduate advisors, and everyone who mentors a less experienced participant in some area of life. Indeed, perhaps the central weakness of Neill’s approach to education is that he

⁴⁰ When this occurs, a libertarian approach to education will certainly want to find out what those other obstacles are and design educational structures to help children overcome them.

⁴¹ By this I do not mean to suggest that the structural conditions of educational “failure” are of no concern. The structure of the school system may well be partially responsible for many actual cases of “failure,” and we should carefully look into this possibility. Yet I strongly affirm the role of students’ agency — their own choices in response to the educational structures in which they find themselves — in bringing about both “failure” and “success”. For discussion, see Giddens (1984: 289-304) and Ferguson (2000).

“[did] not consider that teaching in itself matters very much” (1992: 9)⁴². This weakness is corrected in part by Holt and Illich, who do acknowledge the need for teaching, even if they continue to see the efforts of educators as peripheral, rather than central.

By considering learning through the lens of agency-within-structure, I have gone further than either Holt or Illich in making space for *educating* within a libertarian approach to education. Just as agentic students decide how they respond to the educational structures around them, so too agentic teachers, agentic parents, agentic policy-makers, and so on *create* those structures. They do so in part by their decisions about what areas of learning (such as reading) are optional and what are required. But they also do so by their choices every moment that they are interacting with the children in their care. Educators always have many levels of intervention available to them, ranging from near-total control to near-total non-intervention.⁴³ Somewhere in the middle, most likely, lies the level and type of intervention ideally suited to developing the learner’s educational agency. It is the educators’ role *as* educators to make their best guess as to when a student needs exposure and guidance (and what kind), and when she needs to be left alone to make her own educational path — or perhaps even to get a little lost.

In making such decisions educators necessarily draw on their direct knowledge of individual learners. So the effort to “improve” education is never-ending; it must begin again with each new relationship between learner and educator. If there is an educational “best practice,” it is in the “practical consciousness” (Giddens 1984: 6-7) of teachers, parents, and other educators knowing how to adjust their interactions from learner to learner, and from moment to moment.

⁴² For an excellent discussion of this point, see Hemmings 1973: 190-192. Though Hemmings does not use the terms, he effectively concludes that the education offered at Summerhill failed to adequately support children’s agency-within-structure.

⁴³ Of course, *total* control can never be fully realized, because learners always have at least some agency. Likewise, learners always find themselves in a social structure determined (at least in part) by the choices of their parents, teachers, and so on, so *total* non-intervention is equally impossible.

Yet the practical consciousness and agency of educators, just as much as that of learners, develops over time and in social contexts. In this thesis I have argued that certain structures, such as being required to learn to read, can help enable children to exercise their educational agency. Similarly, educators can benefit from the input of others, both fellow teachers and parents and those who bring the different perspectives of educational research and educational philosophy. So the role of educational research and educational philosophy⁴⁴ is to support individual educators' abilities to respond well to the choices of the individual learners in their care⁴⁵ — not to *hopelessly* search for a Promethean educational process that is *either* student-proof *or* teacher-proof.

Such is the vision of education to which this consideration of libertarian educational theory, agency-within-structure, and learning to read has led me. If it seems too far removed from the libertarian educational theory with which I began this thesis, then — echoing Illich — we might instead call it “hopeful education.”

⁴⁴ In particular, here are some questions I plan to pursue further in light of Illich's conception of hope, along with all it entails for personal responsibility, unpredictability of outcomes, and the inescapable possibility of “failure”: What is a hope-based view of human nature and flourishing, and how does understanding the difference between hope and expectation help us think about the many ways humans can fail to flourish, intentionally or unintentionally (see Smith 2015)? More specifically, what does the idea of hope reveal about the nature and limits of human power, and about individuals and groups whose structural circumstances afford them relatively little scope for action? And finally, what is the importance of both practical and discursive consciousness — an agent's own implicit or explicit awareness of social structures and of her ability to resist certain structures by means of others — for freedom, education, and hope? As I draw this thesis to a close, I eagerly anticipate exploring these matters using the ideas I have developed here.

⁴⁵ My recommendation here strongly resembles that of Erickson (1986), who also emphasizes “the strongly *local* character of classroom teaching” (156, emphasis original) and its implications for research, policy, and practice.

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