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Passing the Buck: Transferring Social and Cultural Capital in an Employment Preparation Program

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Abstract: *This case study examines influences on curriculum in the employment preparation provision of a trade union in British Columbia. Analysis illustrates the importance of forces external to the immediate educational setting, the most pervasive being the requirement to function as an effective means of transferring cultural and social capital to unemployed people.*

Since the inception of the JOBS programs in the US, and Canada Employment and Immigration provision in Canada, education designed to assist unemployed people to re-enter the labour market has become an important part of the work of adult educators. Many university level classes in adult education are heavily populated by educators whose practice involves identifying the best employment goal for others and helping them to achieve that end. Despite the importance of employment preparation both as a source of employment for adult educators and as a background for graduate students, little critical work has been performed in this area. This is particularly true of curricular investigation, an approach tending to be under-emphasised in adult education in general. In the spring of 1998 I had the opportunity to address this gap by examining the influences surrounding knowledge structures in a Canadian employment preparation program.

I approach knowledge as a social artefact, created to serve a purpose, and defined as “any and every set of ideas and acts accepted by one or another social group or society of people – ideas and acts pertaining to what they accept as real for themselves and for others” (McCarthy, 1996, p. 23). This perspective leads to an interest in the value assigned to knowledge in particular settings, such as a curriculum, and to a view of knowledge as an active construction, an ongoing act of creation rather than a single static corpus. What we know is embedded within the ways in which we know it. This raises interesting questions for employment preparation settings. How is it decided that learners need one form of knowledge and not another? How do the

different forms of knowledge within a single program fit together? What influence does the biography of the instructors have? With these questions in mind I entered the research setting.

Union Training Project

The case study (St.Clair, 2000) took place over the summer of 1998 in Union Training Project (UTP, pseudonym), an educational centre in an urban area of British Columbia. The sponsoring union organises workers in large retail companies and has been supporting education, both for members and the community, for several years. UTP had been involved in employment preparation training for about four years at the time of the case study, fulfilling contracts for both the provincial and federal government. During my time there I carried out classroom and other observations, interviewed many people both formally and informally, and developed a collection of documents relating to the programs.

It is unusual to find employment preparation programs within a union. In general the Left have been critical of this provision, seeing it as a mechanism to create a compliant labour force willing to work for minimum wage (cf. Swift, 1995). The coercive aspects of programs, with refusal to attend resulting in lost benefits, has led commentators to call the programs “learnfare,” emphasising the notion of learning for benefits – similar to the workfare notion of working for benefits. Such programs are seen as an attack on the social safety net as a whole, and provision of secure income for the poor in particular.

UTP addresses these issues by attempting to do something different with their employment prepara-

tion programs. Rather than viewing the provision as a coercive means to move people off public assistance, they have developed their programs to work with unemployed people in a holistic way. This means not only recognising the social and family aspects of participants' lives, but also ensuring that programs lead to dignified, secure, and decently paid forms of employment. The program I spent most time working with, the Cooking and Basic Skills (CABS) program, prepared learners to enter the workforce as apprentice chefs, and the training itself could potentially replace one full year of apprenticeship. Work placements associated with the program were targeted at high status hotels and restaurants in the area, ensuring participants were given every opportunity to make a good living in their new profession.

In addition to their desire to provide participants with beneficial outcomes, UTP also hope to improve the public perception of unions through this work. The central strategy to achieve this outcome is ensuring programs recognise the interests of as wide a group of people as possible. Program design involves employers, ensuring the issues of the industry can shape the program curriculum, and each group of participants undertakes a project for the community. In the CABS program the meals produced by learners as they undergo vocational training in school kitchens are sold at cost to local residents, and several older customers told me how much they appreciated the opportunity to get well cooked, nutritious food at an affordable price. This kind of initiative leads to regular coverage in the area's local papers – not an arena commonly associated with positive coverage of trade unions.

The project was founded by two men, one of them a vice-president of the union local and the other a non-profit administrator, who came together in 1995 to create UTP after working on other shared projects. From a single provincially funded program the organisation has grown to 45 staff delivering services to around 1000 learners each year. Despite being a union training centre, community based programs are central to the work of UTP, with 90% of their work dealing with the employment needs of non-members. The organisation is mainly male and white, and as one instructor pointed out "it's striking when you first walk in here. It's not

only male, but it's older male."

Four Themes

In analysing the curriculum of UTP programs I adopted a framework developed by Bernstein (cf. 1977). His approach is to examine the linguistic and para-linguistic codes of educational settings to discover how knowledge is transmitted in the pedagogical process. The framework includes examining how people and ideas are brought together or set apart, and who has control over general behaviour and instructional practices within the institution. At one end of the continuum is a form of code having strong separation of components (such as English and Math) and substantial educator control, reminiscent of a conventional North American high school. The opposite form demonstrates more integration of ideas and people, with educational process negotiated between the parties involved. Community based education often takes on this form. Given the history of unions as agents for greater equality and UTP's commitment to integration, I expected to find an emphasis on the second, more inclusive form of curriculum.

As I examined the various aspects of curriculum at UTP I became aware of tensions between different forms of code. For example, instructors within the programs fall into either vocational or basic skills categories, and the integrative focus at UTP suggests these two groups should be strongly connected. However, my observations and interviews began to reveal that this was not the case, and that both factors external to the agency, such as funding, and internal factors, such as the status given to vocational instruction, ensured they remained strongly separated. In Bernstein's terms, the philosophical push towards a less differentiated code was negated by practical factors requiring a strong separation.

Factors emerging from the analysis fell into four theme areas. Organisational structure included the relationships between instructors mentioned above, and other organisational factors were the high level of differentiation between instructors and administrative staff, and the way subject areas within the curriculum were kept quite separate. Instructional practices dealt with the decision making process around the content, order and pace, and evaluation

of instruction. Control over these areas derived to a large part from funder's guidelines, leaving little to the discretion of instructors, or the expressed interests of learners. One particularly interesting example was that UTP forbade instructors from talking about unions during their sessions in case the funders interpreted it as indoctrination. Dealing with diversity was the third theme, with the project focussing on the creation of a set of rules designed to ban discriminatory practices. These rules tended to be applied patchily, since only demonstrable breaches could be addressed, and also made it difficult to open a discussion about the nature of diversity and difference within the contemporary workplace. This situation is generally compatible with the historically male oriented nature of organised labour (cf. Kincheloe, 1999) and the concomitant tendency to overlook the complexities of identity.

The final theme is the notion of the ideal employee lying at the heart of the training project, and it is worth examining in some detail. The notion is important to the educational process in that it shapes the behavioural expectations of learners and instructors, and is used as the central evaluative mechanism within the organisation. Success is seen as a function of the extent to which the learner is able to approach the ideal good employee, and the most common reasons for asking individuals to leave the program reflect their failure to demonstrate commitment to becoming more like the ideal. UTP programs are a process of acculturation to a set of workplace norms represented by the good employee ideal.

The attributes attached to the good employee are primarily affective, and include motivation, pride in the work, and commitment to profession. Concrete behaviours are taken as indicators of the underlying attitude, with punctuality, for example, seen as a sign of responsibility and engagement with employment. The program is viewed as an opportunity both to learn and to demonstrate that kind of attitude.

We keep saying "you might be going to school but really think of it like you're going to work," because it really is work. We try and set up our work structures as close to work environment as we can get, with the

same kinds of expectations that would take place in a workplace. (administrator)

The emphasis on attitude derives from the UTP administrators' belief that most employment problems arise from interpersonal relations and not from specifically vocational issues.

A guy who's got his ticket in sheet metal, he's not going to get fired cause he can't do the sheet metal . . . he'll get fired because of something that's going on between him and another worker, or between him and the boss, or sometimes something that they bring from home, conflicts from home that don't get resolved and then they bring that attitude to the workforce. (instructor)

While it is hard to argue against responsibility as a desirable trait for employees, two aspects of the construction of the good employee at UTP are more problematic. The first is that there is little open exploration of what it means to be a good employee, and very little negotiation with learners. In effect, participants have to accept the UTP ideal to become part of the program, an especially important concern in a context where people must attend this or a similar program to retain unemployment benefits. Participants must learn to act in ways consistent with the desired attributes or risk losing benefits, an invidious choice to offer. The second concern is the way the good employee ideal can become internalised by the participants, forming what Foucault (1980) calls a technology of the self. The program, as I mentioned earlier, recognises the interests and values of employers in their design, meaning that learners can come to measure themselves against the idealised view of employers. The emphasis on employment issues as an outcome of personal attitudes and the lack of room for alternative understandings of successful work relations reinforce the likelihood of learners coming to view themselves as never being quite good enough to meet the reasonable demands of employers.

It is not necessarily a problem to find a code form featuring strongly separated subject areas and people along with top down control in an employment preparation programs, and most analyses

would suggest such an educational approach to be highly consistent with the aims of the provision. In the case of UTP, however, it contradicts the espoused intent of the educational process. The holistic worker the project sets out to create is overshadowed by a conjunction of vocational interests ensuring participants do not get information on unions and leave the program with an employer influenced view of themselves as working people. It is extremely ironic to find a union delivering education designed to perpetuate, and even reinforce, the current relations of the workplace. It is even more ironic to achieve this by convincing learners that unemployment is a result of their attitudes.

Capital Works

The notions of social and cultural capital can provide useful insights into the contradiction between the aims of UTP and the results identified in this analysis. Bourdieu (1990, 1997) considers experience and social networks as forms of capital equivalent to, and able to be converted into, economic capital. Within any field success requires both being able to do certain things and having personal contacts to call on. For example, becoming a carpenter involves both learning how to work with wood and building up enough credibility with contractors to get work. The pay the carpenter receives recognises not just physical labour but the whole complex of attributes necessary to gain employment, and is an economic return on cultural and social capital. These relational forms of capital will be different in each field.

The work done by UTP is to move participants between the field of unemployment and the field of apprentice chef. The expectations, demands, and forms of capital having value are quite different in the two fields. While unemployed it may be extremely desirable for a single parent to have a network of other parents able to provide care for each other's children when necessary, a form of social capital. When employed this network may be less valuable because the employed parent finds it far harder to reciprocate and loses credibility with the group, leading to loss of this particular form of social capital. Entry to the new field of apprenticeship requires a different kind of social capital involved with being a working cook, and a critical function of the

employment programs is to ensure participants have access to this capital.

UTP can be considered as a mechanism for transferring the capital of the workplace to unemployed people. This function makes a tightly controlled curricular code both sensible and necessary. Like any other form of capital, cultural and social forms are susceptible to both contamination and inappropriate expenditure. Cultural capital, or the knowledge of how to do things, must be protected from being diluted by unorthodox approaches to the profession of cooking, possibly leading to a reduction in the value of official knowledge of the trade. The social capital of the vocational instructors is on the line when they ask their industry colleagues to provide work experience for participants. If the wrong people, badly trained, were sent out to the top hotels in the province, the instructors would lose credibility, and finally, their own social capital. It is critical to ensure learners will approach the job in a manner consistent with the current state of the vocation, a function performed well by the strongly bounded form of knowledge found in UTP employment programs.

The cost to be paid for this high degree of control over the capital transfer process is compromise with both the collective interests of labour and the espoused philosophy of the UTP founders. Holistic and integrated approaches to people and employment are only possible for some people some of the time, and, in terms of capital transfer, are a risky strategy. Keeping the program divided into basic skills and vocational aspects makes it far easier to ensure the cooking knowledge is being passed on in a pure form, and imposing a clear but limited view of the good employee makes sure people know what they have to do to get access to the capital. The desire of UTP founders to do something different with employment preparation is obscured by the need to justify their involvement with this area of work, and ensure they are seen as a program worthy of funding.

Conclusion

The case study of UTP demonstrates how the interests of funders and policymakers can combine with the perspective of employers and the self interest of an organisation – however enlightened – to

limit what knowledge becomes part of the curriculum and how it can be transmitted. Rather than creating a more inclusive alternative to traditional employment preparation programs, UTP have developed a particularly effective version of them. While there are important differences, such as the refusal to allow participants to end up in an entry level, dead end job, the project's emphasis on attitude personalises unemployment in a manner common to many neo-liberal understandings of the labour market. The construction of unemployment as individual deficit remains central.

UTP employment programs are, finally, a lost opportunity. The potential for doing something different is certainly there, but to bring it into reality will require careful reflection upon the program as well as analysis of the possibilities available within the current and future funding structures. I believe it is essential to change the educational culture and to develop a respectful and informative support for unemployed people to become engaged and effective participants in the workplace, an objective strongly consistent with both the historical approach of unions and the espoused philosophy of UTP. As Dewey argued, "the chief opportunity for science is the discovery of the relations of a man to his work – including his relations to others who take part – which will enlist his intelligent interest in what he is doing" (1916, p. 85). This aim requires more of adult education than being a way to pass the buck.

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