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Recommended Citation

Grace, André P. (2006). "Creating a Blueprint for a Critical Social Pedagogy of Learning for Life and Work: Canadian Perspectives," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2006/papers/27>

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Creating a Blueprint for a Critical Social Pedagogy of Learning for Life and Work: Canadian Perspectives

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Keywords: Cyclical lifelong learning, critical social pedagogy, learner participation

Abstract: In Canada, current federal learning-and-work policy is focused on individual learner-worker development using an iteration of lifelong learning as cyclical. Increasing numbers of disenfranchised young adults are resisting participation in such learning. In this regard, I consider the predicament of young adults in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. To help us think about adequately addressing the dislocation they experience in life and work, I offer a Freire-informed vision of a critical social pedagogy of learning and work.

Current Canadian federal learning-and-work policy aims to enhance the social as an effect of enhancing the economic. Such policy is focused on individual learner-worker development using an iteration of lifelong learning as cyclical. In this neoliberal milieu, cyclical lifelong learning has become not only a norm, but also a culture and an attitude. It is focused on assimilation, conditioning workers to get with the program, which is framed in neoliberal pragmatic terms. Still a current Canadian phenomenon indicates that increasing numbers of young adults are disengaging from participation in such learning that the federal government considers being a preventative measure. In this paper, I discuss young adults' reactions to what might be perceived as cyclical lifelong learning for control. I consider a particularly challenging case: the predicament of young adults in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. To help us think about adequately addressing the dislocation they experience in life and work, I offer a Freire-informed vision of a critical social pedagogy of learning and work.

Learning-and-Work Policy in Canada in Neoliberal Times

In Canada, current federal learning-and-work policy is focused on individual learner-worker development and an iteration of lifelong learning involving a regimen of cyclical training throughout one's work life (Grace, 2004, 2005). This neoliberal policy modulation puts instrumental and economistic concerns first as it presumes a trickle-down effect in which learning abets a prosperous economy, which, in turn, enhances society. The Canadian Government provides its version of this effect in the 2004 federal budget in which it positions learning as the keystone of economic and social progress and the basis for active citizenship.

In times of rapid change, learning is the means by which workers adapt their skills and capacities to the new economic and social environments. For society as a whole, ensuring broad access to learning is the key to enhanced equality of opportunity, increased social mobility, and greater social stability and cohesion. It also provides the necessary foundation for the active participation of all Canadians in a progressive and democratic society. (2004 Canadian federal budget, excerpt as quoted in Courchene, 2005, p. 13)

Indeed, for at least a decade, Canada as a representative late capitalist economy has experienced a pervasive neoliberal policy consensus that stresses the value of a knowledge-based economy, technology and skill development, and a learning society in which cyclical lifelong

learning is not only a norm, but also a culture and an attitude (Courchene, 2005; Grace, 2004). In this learning society, participation is couched in terms of involvement in economic forms of lifelong learning that can apparently help learner-workers avoid the implicit risk of social and economic exclusion that non-participation threatens (Edwards, 2000). Of course, as Edwards (2000) underscores, the underlying assumption is that lifelong learning will succeed and be a cure for dislocation. However, his answer to the question “Do all lifelong-learning practices benefit learners?” is “No.” Many Canadian young adults are providing the same answer. While more of them appear to be staying in school due to a difficult labor market and the perception that a better education helps realize a better future, many others are not disposed to cyclical participation in lifelong learning (HRDC, 2002). For them, inflexibility has become the marker of lifelong learning in its cyclical iteration in which much of their involvement amounts to what Field (2000) calls learning by conscription. As such, learning becomes “an internalized ‘ought’” (Cunningham, 1988, p. 141), and the voluntary nature of participation in adult learning is diminished. Even worse, “the most coercive forms of [learning by] conscription are likely to be applied to those who stand outside the learning society, for whatever reason” (Field, 2000, p. 124). Moreover, not to participate in whatever forms of lifelong learning are offered can, in a real sense, be interpreted as contributing to an erosion of citizenship. This is because being a full and contributing citizen of a nation is usually considered synonymous with being employed, paid, and productive. The impact of participation versus non-participation will now be discussed in relation to a particularly challenging case.

Young Adults in the Canadian Province of Newfoundland and Labrador: A Challenging Case of Dislocation

When cyclical lifelong learning leaves certain learner-workers behind, those losing out in learning and work are often positioned as an apparent burden within a politics of blame:

The unskilled, unqualified and uneducated, it seems, are not only likely to face diminishing opportunities themselves; they also become an anchor, dragging back the application of knowledge and preventing the educated and creative majority from enjoying to the full the accessible fruits of the knowledge society. (Field, 2000, p. 17)

For those young adults who are on the periphery of productivity in the new economy, it is hard to find a way out. Indeed, their lack of knowledge, skills, and credentials can exclude them from engaging in cyclical lifelong learning because ongoing training and development usually presume prior learning. Moreover, those disenfranchised often associate engaging in low quality work, when they have it, with increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and increased roles and demands (CCDF, 2003). Nowhere in Canada is this sad scenario better demonstrated than by the sorry learning-and-work predicament experienced individually and socially by many young adults in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is not only the “have-not” province’s codfish industry that has been decimated for more than a decade, but also its future—its young adults. During 2000-01, 93.8% of the province’s out-migrants were young adults (StatsCan/NLSA, 2002). During 2001-02, the unemployment rate for young adults ranged from a low of 17.9% to a high of 27.5% (StatsCan, 2003).

This social misery is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of young adults who have been employed in the province have not been engaged in quality work. They are generally working in retail sales (34%), restaurant and fast-food services (20%), the service industry (12%), and general labor (11%) (Govt. of NL, 2003). This reflects a growing trend whereby the most rapid economic growth, at least in Canada and the USA, has been in the retail sector, with

Wal-Martization—the growth of largely non-union and low-wage jobs that threaten living standards—becoming a pervasive phenomenon. Young adults caught up in this scenario exemplify Bauman's (1996) postmodern workers. Such workers toil in an unstable work world where jobs are often unprotected, appearing and disappearing without warning. In this work milieu, rationalization is the code word for justifying instability in the name of increasing company profits. Despite the rhetoric, any sense of vocation loses meaning as postmodern workers are left to run the corporate gauntlet that always seems to require quicker steps, different steps. However, the dance is always about upholding a pragmatic-technicist view of work in which, as Freire (2004) asserted, “what matters is the transference of technical, instrumental knowing, which ensures good productivity for [business and] industry” (p. 77). In the end learner-workers are reduced to corporatized vagrants, wandering from job to job and workplace to workplace.

Exacerbating this kind of instability in learning and work for young adults in Newfoundland and Labrador is the difficulty and frequent impossibility of finding quality work close to home. Moreover, many young adults in Newfoundland and Labrador usually have little input into the form, practicality, utility, and cultural sensibility of their learning (Grace, 2005). Indeed the current provision of knowledge-and-skills training in the province often exacerbates their life-and-work situations. The dislocation that these young adults experience when their learning fails to help them attain a place in the provincial job market is often compounded by further dislocation from family and community when these learner-workers have to move away in order to find work. This dislocation not only diminishes the learner-worker, but it also diminishes the province as a social entity and community of communities.

In 2003 the Royal Commission on youth that focused on strengthening Newfoundland and Labrador's place in Canada reported that the vast majority of young people felt “a regretful lack of choice” in their pursuit of career opportunities close to their home communities or within the province (Young, Davis, & Igloliorte, 2003, p. 187). The Commission blamed the crisis of employment and retention on a lack of supports for young adults such as adequate career development services (Young, Davis, & Igloliorte, 2003). Here, in assigning blame, the Commission chanted the neoliberal federal mantra of support for cyclical lifelong learning and individual learner-worker development. The Commission's emphasis on the need for career development services illustrates that lifelong learning and workforce enhancement have conjoined in a sustained consultative and collaborative process of career development (CCDF, 2003). Indeed the Canadian Career Development Foundation (2003) currently portrays career development services as “portals for learning and work across the lifespan” (p. 4). To drive career development, the foundation situates cyclical lifelong learning as a strategic process for worker renewal and upgrading. This is viewed to be in Canada's interest because adult-worker participation in adult education and training stagnated throughout the 1990s, creating a tremendous need for workers to renew and upgrade continuously in order to keep the nation's economy globally competitive (CCDF, 2003). Unfortunately, linking cyclical lifelong learning and workforce enhancement tends to distance education from the contexts and relationships shaping individuals and communities. Instead education emphasizes partnering with government and corporations in ways that abet privatization and other economic components of the neoliberal agenda. In this dim light, dislocated young adults offer this challenge to those who would assist them with in-vogue career development: to replace a crisis delivery model of lifelong learning with culturally relevant career-development services that help young adults have choices and develop prowess in decision-making (CCDF, 2003). In their message to

government policy-makers and employers preparing for the November 2003 *Pan-Canadian Symposium on Career Development, Lifelong Learning, and Workplace Development*, representative young adults emphasized, “We need

1. To feel we are learning with a purpose,
2. [To have] mentorship in educational and workplace settings,
3. To have guidance and networks to access meaningful work, [and]
4. To have teachers and counselors who are not stretched to the limit.” (CCDF, 2003, p. 5)

Envisioning a Critical Social Pedagogy of Learning and Work

Canada has a highly educated workforce, and still the employed, underemployed, and unemployed are all constantly told that they need more learning for work to have a place in the new economy. With a focus on more education for the already educated, Courchene (2005) provides this context that sets parameters to cyclical lifelong learning in the new economy in Canada: “With information empowerment as the sine qua non of meaningful citizenship, a societal commitment to a human capital future for Canadians emerges as the principal avenue to promote both [economic] competitiveness and [social] cohesion” (p. 11). Social policy is recontextualized in this economic paradigm: “Indeed, social policy as it relates to broadening and deepening of human capital now falls squarely in the domain of KBE [knowledge-based economy] economic policy” (Courchene, 2005, p. 3). While such policy is attentive to instrumental and economic needs in building a human capital future, it is often inattentive to the social and cultural needs of learner-workers (Field, 2000). In this regard, how is the cyclical lifelong-learning movement neglecting young adults? Perhaps it is by leaving out a sufficient and meaningful focus on the critical social context and its concerns with historical awareness, hope, possibility, ethics, justice, democratic vision, learner freedom, critique, and intervention. Freire (2004) holds that such a focus is necessary to build the critical intelligence needed to be fully, respectfully, and politically active in the world.

To the extent that we become capable of transforming the world, of naming our own surroundings, of apprehending [or critically questioning], of making sense of things, of deciding, of choosing, of valuing, and finally of ethicizing the world, our mobility within it and through history necessarily comes to involve dreams toward whose realization we struggle. Thus, it follows that our presence in the world, which implies choice and decision, is not a neutral presence. The ability to observe, to compare, and to evaluate, in order to choose, through deciding, how one is to intervene in the life of ... [communities] and thus exercise one’s citizenship, arises then as a fundamental competency. (p. 7, emphases in original)

Choosing to build critical intelligence as a basis for more inclusive and meaningful citizenship, we are able to engage in education for social transformation that focuses on learners’ abilities and capacities to make choices and decisions. Freire (2004) maintained that such critical education involves a process of denouncing grim realities such as the apparent Canadian societal commitment to the mechanistic human capital future that Courchene (2005) describes. This commitment equates information prowess with valuable Canadian citizenship. Such reductionism is distressing and problematic, at least for those educators who wish to engage learner-workers in holistic—instrumental, social and cultural—education. In this regard Freire challenged us to announce a different reality, one that empowers learner-workers as critical questioning subjects who focus on their location in life, learning, and work. Building and employing a critical social pedagogy of learning and work enables us to create these learner-and-worker-centered dynamics. Here critical educators begin by apprehending and working to

understand the techno-rational nature of instruction and the objectification of learner-workers within it. Rather than succumb to economistic learning designs and a pragmatic preoccupation with skill development, we question what we are to learn before we learn it. We use this critical pedagogy to teach both educators and learner-workers how to insert themselves into the world as historical and ethical subjects who resist, critique, decide, and transgress in order to create possibilities for changing objectifying KBE conditions. From a Freirean perspective, this process is most effective not only when we gain access to particular instrumental or technical knowledge, but also when we build a critical social understanding of our presence and place in the world. This emphasis on understanding the politics of one's location is crucial if learner-workers are to gain some degree of control over their participation in learning for work and life.

In a Freirean (2004) context, when we engage a critical social pedagogy of learning and work, we place value on learner-workers as a civic collective who are actively involved in learning focused on creating a better society. We challenge the mechanistic building of a human capital future based solely on emphasizing pragmatic individual training and development. Indeed there is not adequate research to support playing up a link between individual training and development and economic productivity in the knowledge-based economy (Edwards, Miller, Small, & Tate, 2002). This leaves us with a complex question: How might we revise a human capital future within a civic focus that keeps public responsibility alive as a policy factor? In other words, how do we realize an iteration of inclusive lifelong learning for all in a socially responsive and accountable manner? Answering this question requires critical educators to deliberate issues of access, accommodation, disposition, contexts, and relationships of power in developing and implementing iterations of lifelong learning that enable the unskilled, unqualified, undereducated, underemployed, and unemployed to participate more fully in work and culture.

Freire (2004) engaged in radical, critical pedagogy as a political project aimed at preventing education from being reduced to solely instrumental, economistic training that failed to attend to other matters of context, disposition, and relationship. Progressive educators, such as those in Newfoundland and Labrador who would like to address the crisis of employment and retention among young adults, might do the same thing. Committed to an ethical manner of teaching in which they think through their practice, thus theorizing it, these educators could focus on the possibility of change for the better. Freire avowed, "I am convinced that the first condition for being able to accept or reject one form or another of manifesting change is being *open* to the new, to the different, to innovation, to doubt" (p. 12, emphasis in original). Within the dynamics of this openness, progressive educators are called to reject the fatalism of neoliberal pragmatism that requires learner-workers to accept rather than challenge and change reality. They are asked to proceed cognizant of the complex social, historical, cultural, political, and economic change forces that impact the life, learning, and work landscape. They are asked to teach their discipline using a critical analysis of dominant culture, society, and economics. They are challenged to ensure that proactive subjectivity and social solidarity are not lost in the passive acceptance that is today's "single historic exit" (p. 19). This political and pedagogical work would hopefully engender a liberating educational practice that values the exercise of will, of decision, of resistance, of choice, the role of emotions, of feelings, of desires, of limits, the importance of historical awareness, of an ethical human presence in the world, and the understanding of history as possibility and never as determination. (p. 24)

As Freire envisioned it, the critical purposes of education are to build a deep understanding of the world and the word, and to foster a commitment to change oppressive

realities. To fulfill these purposes, Freire wanted educators to be competent, eager, emotionally aware, and respectful of learner-workers. He asked them to teach learner-workers “to think critically, while teaching them content” (p. 83). In other words, Freire wanted educators to assist learner-workers to become “critical persons who can think fast, who have a sense of risk-taking, who are curious, and who question things” (p. 83). The juxtaposition of these notions put people before profits. They are at the heart of building a critical social pedagogy of learning and work.

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