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Migrant Workers, Grassroots Transnationalism, and Agency in Learning

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Keywords: lifelong learning, migrant workers, grassroots transnationalism

Abstract: A new approach to the lifelong learning paradigm is required to include transnational learners. This research shows that migrant workers, who by definition belong to multiple communities, seek learning experiences to sustain and enhance capabilities as contemporary workers. This is the case for why global non-elites form transnational agency with learning priorities.

In this so-called “global era,” geographical borders are often said to have disappeared. Dramatic changes have facilitated the flow of capital, information, products and labour on a global scale and, with these flows, the mobility of the world’s workers has increased. According to Ohmae (1991, 1995) workers have fewer and fewer barriers to employ themselves and can go virtually anywhere in this borderless world. This may explain the lives of some groups of jet-setter professionals, who we might imagine working for the giant multinational corporations in the great cities of the world.

It does not, however, explain the ever-present challenges facing many contemporary workers, who remain vulnerable and under “pressure to keep cost[s] down and profit[s] up” (Newlands, 2002, p. 217). Many of them cross borders to offer their labour in countries which they presume to have more opportunities for higher paid work, be it low-skilled or menial. These “cross-borderers” are to be called migrant workers in this paper. Currently, there are 192,000,000 migrant workers in the world (International Organization for Migration, 2005).

According to previous research, migrant workers are often forced to make multiple moves throughout their lives (Bhachu, 1985). In most cases, they comprise the non-citizen labour force in the countries where they settle and the only part of them that tends to be valued by the local population is their hands. They typically endure turbulent life experiences as they provide their unlimited labour in contexts which afford them scant protection. But they are, contrary to outward appearances, adult learners who try to plan and organize their learning according to the various stages of their adult lives.

Herein lies the problem and the challenge to the lifelong learning paradigm. Because of their location at the interstices of their home state and host state, they are ineligible for official consideration to be participants in the education and training opportunities that are available for contemporary workers. They nonetheless search for those opportunities, sometimes creating their own, sometimes depending on the support of local civic action groups but, all too often, they remain disappointed.

There is a dearth of research exploring the range, intensity and challenge of learning experiences undertaken by groups of migrant workers in the world and the implications these experiences may bring to the lifelong learning policies of a nation-state. This research is one attempt to fill the gap.

Conceptual/Theoretical Context

Critical arguments located across multiple disciplines areas are incorporated to discuss a concept of learning experiences for non-citizen migrant workers. Specifically, the notion of global citizenship is utilized. It provides the conceptual base to discuss lifelong and life-wide learning as an indispensable human right. Additionally, an analysis of the lifelong learning paradigm is presented to show the heightened value of learning continuously throughout our lives. Finally, concerns are raised regarding the common perceptions of migrant workers as “workers in danger” or “workers whose knowledge, skills, and attitudes need not be upgraded.”

To begin, critical arguments on citizenship in the global era, and its relationship to the status of migrant workers, provide an overview of the social situation and membership of non-citizen migrant workers. Following Young (1990), I identify migrant workers as a social group. The status of this unique group of people requires a complex conceptualization of their membership to the society in which they reside. This is not essentializing migrant workers as a group with a fixed identity but as a group without identifying common attributes. They have differences, such as their class background, race/ethnicity, nationality and gender, and are treated differently. On the one hand, they are often described as “irreducible others” due to these differences. On the other, they are “cross-borderers” who are situated between the borders.

Transnationality, therefore, may situate migrant workers differently from those of other socially marginalized groups of people in the host nation. Notion of global citizenship emphasizes differentiated understandings on governance and memberships in this globalized era. While the dramatic changes have configured the world to be much different than before, the citizenship framework has always been commonly presumed to be “a juridical relationship between an individual and a ‘single’ nation-state” (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1997, p. 113). That migrant workers lack citizenship in their place of living blurs the boundary of the overall rights of these workers, including human rights, which are intertwined with civil, social and political rights in the life-world space (Castles & Miller, 1993; Castles & Davidson, 2000; Blomley & Pratt, 2001; Ottonelli, 2002). The notion of global citizenship is used to explain the political significance of migration and support the efforts to challenge the uniform notion of citizenship which fails to accommodate many groups of people who are at risk of falling into the gaps that global situations may create (Soysal, 1994; Williams, 2002).

Additionally, a critical lens is adopted to look into the current sweeping notion of lifelong learning as a systemic restraint which makes the learning experiences of migrant workers challenging. Lifelong learning is often addressed as a survival issue for all contemporary workers who are living through this turbulent world. Purposeful learning, be it formal, non-formal or informal, is necessitated to achieve the needed capabilities required by the current economic milieu (Delors, 1996; OECD, 1996; European Commission, 2001; Government of Canada, 2001).

Changing the politics of lifelong learning, however, is challenging for two reasons. One, it is neo-liberal. This is seen particularly when it pushes many people to the boundary of the learning space by subjugating the notion of learning to the imperative of world-wide capitalistic changes (Griffin, 1999; Cruikshank, 2002). Two, it is nation-centric in that, clearly, the actual apparatus for the facilitation of lifelong learning is based on national systems which delineate boundaries (Mojab, 2004). This reminds us that we must be conscious of how globalization has done away with national borders and sovereignty (Brown et al, 2001). Migrant workers are faced with a closed dialogue on their rights to continue meaningful learning in the place they live. Far from being encouraged to continue meaningful learning, they experience deskilling and are

disregarded as “non-competent stagnant workers” (Philippine Women Center of British Columbia, 2005).

Researching Migrant Workers in Korea

In the past several centuries, migrant workers were mostly accepted into Europe and North America. This phenomenon, however, has expanded to become a reality in Asian countries (Castles & Davidson, 2000; Sassen, 1999; Munck, 2002). My study on the learning undertaken by a group of migrant workers in Korea aimed first to characterize the learning experiences of the workers and determine how and why these learning experiences are sustained in this specific context of work. Second, the goal was to see how these experiences and perspectives inform the lifelong learning approach for migrant workers as well as other groups of people who lead their lives transnationally.

Two groups of participants were invited to take part in this research. The first is a group of nineteen documented and undocumented migrant workers.⁵ The second group included eleven Korean learning providers who are, either implicitly or explicitly, engaged in facilitating various activities for migrant workers, such as work, education, training and cultural activities. Semi-structured interviews were used because they are characterized as the principal means of qualitative researchers (Fontana & Frey, 1998; Schensul & LeCompte, 1999) and are often described as an effective way to approach people’s experiences in their own words, rather than in the words of the researcher (Reinharz, 1992).

With the worker participants, I focused on the participants’ own interpretation of their learning experiences, which were conducted both in and out of their workplaces. The purpose was to discern their reasons for participation and identify the satisfying and challenging aspects the experiences. For the learning providers, the questions focused on their roles in the activities, as well as their personal perspectives on the learning of migrant workers. With these two groups of research data in hand, I benefited from the comparison and reconstruction of the data, which gave me comprehensive understanding and insight into their learning experiences.

The overall finding showed that the learning experiences of the workers are sustained to enhance multiple capabilities—occupational, social, and political; first, as contemporary workers who maintain competence required by their changing circumstances, and second, as people belonging to multiple communities situated across borders. To be contemporary workers, they tried to learn employable (or self-employable) skills needed to extend their stay, return home, or move to another country. To do this, they participated in individual or collective learning activities to enhance occupational capabilities, which they need either currently or in the future. These experiences showed that they are making an effort to sustain dual occupational livelihoods through constant learning.

As people who belong to multiple communities, enhancing social or cultural capabilities was shown to be critical to their lives. The workers participated in activities that enhanced their understanding of the disparate societies and the cultures around them. To do so, they updated their knowledge at home to reaffirm the worth of their cultures, learned about Korean culture, introduced their own culture to Koreans, and actively linked themselves to a number of other cultures and a multitude of people. Through this process of mutual interaction, multicultural understanding was incubated and shared among a broad range of people.

All workers reported that they actively participate in the politics of their home country. Some talked about their work to provide disaster relief to Tsunami victims. Others spread

⁵ Undocumented refers to those workers who have illegally overstayed their official work permit term.

information about what was going on in their country to gain recognition of the need to pay attention to what is going on there. One group of workers, from Myanmar, paid particularly sharp attention to the situation at home, where a ruthless military regime holds power. Many workers also participated in social action to improve their marginalized status in Korea. In all instances, the workers enhanced their political capabilities over multiple places, particularly when institutional actors, such as ethnic communities, Korean or international NGOs, were engaged. This enabled them to maintain a complex web of political relations in multiple societies.

The findings confirmed that these workers conducted active learning even under the tremendous systemic pressures of being an alien in an unfamiliar space. Even though they are labelled “migrant workers” in the global flows, they do not see this as their primary identity, and do not necessarily have the same lifelong learning priorities (i.e. “marketable skills”) as other workers in the corporate world.

New Configuration for Lifelong Learning

I argue that these “global non-elites” are transnational citizens with learning priorities, social agency and identity. Migrant workers cannot just be seen in terms of descriptive macro-level migrant flows, or international and national labour markets. Transnational space belongs to these global grassroots as well as the global power brokers. Migrant workers should be recognized as transnational adult learners who search for places to learn even in their marginalized position.

The fluid and complex existence of migrant workers requires us to reconsider what lifelong learning means for the people who belong to this group. I problematize the absence of a theoretical framework or approach which is inclusive of learning experiences of migrant workers. Opposing any ad-hoc or add-on approaches to this subject, I argue that the learning of migrant workers can only be justly accommodated when they are entitled to proper status within an inclusive approach of lifelong learning based on an appropriate form of transnational citizenship.

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