

CHANGING WORKING CONDITIONS, LIFELONG LEARNING
AND BIOGRAPHY IN A NEW ECONOMY

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1. Objectives

Our general objective is the understanding of the relationship between changing working conditions and lifelong learning in the context of emergence of the new economy. More specifically, we want to understand how, throughout their occupational life course of the employees, the relation between working situation and learning practices is moving, as well as how they review (or not) their representation of the learning activities.

The general study addresses two questions:

- How changing working conditions influence the array of learning activities?
- How formal and informal learning practices contribute to change in the workplace?

We cannot realize fully this objective, if we do not consider, also from a biographical perspective, the relations between work and learning. Specific conditions and social characteristics of individuals mediate, throughout life, the evolving links between changing working conditions and both formal or informal learning practices (Doray and Arrowsmith, 1997; Doray, 1999; Blair, McPake, and Munn 1995). Neither informal learning nor the participation in organized adult education can be fully understood without relating these to the social process of accessibility to educational resources and the social construction of meanings of these learning practices. In the

perspective of the supply–demand interactive theory, the study will consider not only the public educational policies and the private policies of the firm, as important factors increasing and orienting “supply” in the context of the new economy, but will look also at the formal and informal negotiation of the learning demand between the actors within the enterprises. The initial questions need thus further specification:

- How changing conditions in enterprise affect, all along one’s biography, the individual work situation and employment, accessibility to learning resources and meanings of adult learning?
- How individual cope with changes, to that end may resort to learning practices and reinforce or change the representation of learning?
- How different meanings given to formal and informal learning relate to changes in the workplace?
- How cultural and social dispositions, shaped and reshaped by the first educational experience, adult education experience and former transition period, influence the perceptions and attitudes relatives to learning?

In fact, we can summarize our point of view with the following graphic. We can identify a dynamic relationship between changing work and the development of learning. This relation is mediated by the biography of individual, which have two sides: objective situations and representation of action.

We can study informal learning and the participation in organized adult education as well as their relation to work in different ways. The quantitative analysis addresses issues like rate of participation, nature of activity and identifies significant factors, which modulate participation. Because this kind of analysis is less efficient to deal with the meaning of social action (as participation to learning), the consideration of the changes

work the workplace and life context of individuals, the general survey will be complimented with qualitative biographical analysis. In other words, the use of different methods introduces a change in the scale of observation and conduct to a different knowledge (Lahire, 1996, 1998 et 2002).

2. Theoretical framework

The transformation of economic structures and techniques of production, linked to the new economy, generates *critical transition points* in both the occupational life-course and in the learning biography of individuals. These transition moments are heuristic period (Alheit, 1994) to grasp meanings that people gives to different learning practices, and to understand, according to their background and life context, the different ways they tend to resort to learning to cope with these changes.

The transition period introduces, for individuals, incertitude about employment and work. This moment opens possibilities for “renegotiating¹” work situation and reviewing the representation of learning. The central issue of these biographical accounts of learning is to see how individuals, in different social conditions and in a segmented labour market, cope with the “incertitude” (Beck) of these transition periods, how they resort to different types of learning to do so and what meanings (Street, 1995) they give to these learning experiences in their life project.

Work transitions refer to change of jobs (occupational, professional and geographical mobility), to change of techniques of production (related to organizational changes or to the implementation of new technology) within ones’ job, and to interruption of jobs (as a result of lay-off or occupational health).

¹ The concept of negotiation will be used in two senses: formal negotiation as industrial relations and informal negotiation with the hierarchy and colleague during the every day work.

Employees may deal with incertitude in a different ways, but all of them would be confronted with appropriation of new knowledge and new skills. In this context, it is important to know how employee learn and what access to training resources, they have. Biographical analysis permits to examine how individuals conceptualize learning and training and what kind of link they shape between learning and work and between formal and informal learning. The relation between formal and informal, all along one's biography, may be either cumulative, conflictual or "uncertain".

The different meanings given to different learning modes will be analyzed in reference to the orientations according to which people cope or are required to cope with the incertitude vis a vis work, employment as well as social participation and articulation of family life and work. One can distinguish (Beck, Scott-Lash, Giddens; Dubet, 1994; Dubar et al, 1989) three general types of such orientation of action in a moment of transition: « adaptative and passive integration », « strategic integration » or « resistance often leading to diffuse or overt negotiation ». While the first orientation is passive and tends to reinforce dependency, the two others, of a more reflexive character, tend to increase the autonomy of action of the subject.

Such orientations and different patterns of recourse to formal and non formal learning throughout ones life will be analyzed taking into account initial education, socially bound relation to cultural practices, gender condition, different occupational status and life-long preponderant position of the individual in the segmented labour market.

These biographical analyses, contrasting with classical in-depth incursion in the life of very few individuals (Alheit, 1994; Dominice, 2000; Pinau, 1990, 1992), will focus on critical biographical periods: initial education, the first four active years (which is, according to Tuijnman (198) a crucial phase for further participation patterns), the critical 25-35 age period for

women at work, individual occupational transition points and the current state of learning practice as observed in the general survey. At each phase, the biographical analysis will depict the factual course of action as well as the subjective meanings individuals are giving to each of them.

3. Methodological considerations

In order to document relationship with changing working conditions, learning activities (formal and informal) and biography of individual, we will select 96 respondents of the general survey according to the following criteria (graphic 2):

- Indication of significant transition in the last five years of their working life;
- Residence in two areas, Great Toronto and Great Montreal areas, known for their specific regime of industrial relations and their different cultural context;
- Gender, taking into account the gender difference in working life condition and in domestic division of labour;
- Initial education level and socio-occupational situation (considering the impact of social position on the working conditions, on mobility and on accessibility to educational resources).

In general, we will follow methodological indications of life histories approach (Pineau, 1989) and retrospective event histories (Glick and al, 1995). Two methodological tools have been retained to capture both the objective biographical events and the subjective meanings of social action:

- Short questionnaire, administered by the interviewer, for establishing the sequence of work and learning practices and events;
- Semi-structured interviews to complete the factual information and capture the meanings given by the subject to the way he has coped with the last transition, as well as to his or her learning history, work

and employment biography, family history, current evolving work conditions, previous work-related transition points and life-long and life-wide accessibility to learning resources.

The topics of interview:

- Characteristics of the actual working transition period
 - Nature of change and circumstances of learning proposition
 - The ways the enterprise and employees cope with change
 - Characteristics of learning activities (formal and informal) relative to the transition
 - Impression about and assessment of the approach to change/transition

- Educational biographical background
 - Initial education
 - Opinions and attitudes about school, schooling, education, etc.
 - Subjective relevancy of the subsequent learning events
 - Sequence of organized sequence adult education events
 - Involvement in informal learning activities
 - Meaning of informal learning activities
 - Representation of absence or presence of complementary between formal and informal learning

- Occupational path
 - Professional careers

- Previous transition period
 - Nature of transition
 - Mode of management of transition
 - Importance of learning activities in the transition

- Description of family condition

- Marital status
- Number of children
- Family acceptability for taking time in adult education

In order to reward participants, attempts will be made, in collaboration with local adult education centre, to offer them the possibility of building on the first reconstruction of their education biography for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR)

3. Resources required

Fieldwork and preparation of data (6 persons during 13 weeks, full time)

- 6 interviewers (3 in Toronto and 3 in Montreal). Two of those will be co-ordinating the field work (participating in the choice of respondents and monitoring the data collection);
- Each interviewer required 24 hours per interview: 2 hours for preparing the interview (using the data from the survey, 2 hours for transportation, 2 hours for the interview, 12 hours for transcription, 4 hours for coding and 2 hours for coding the small questionnaire) for a total of 384 hours each;
- Two days will be required for training the interviewers;
- Each co-ordinators will require each 70 hours more for the selection and recruitment of respondents and for monitoring the process.

Analysis

- One graduate student during two years: full time from May to August and part-time (15 hours a weeks) between September to April.

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Graphic 2

