Learning for Life and Work in an Era of Cyclical Lifelong Learning for Control: The Case of Young Adults in Canada

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Abstract: In Canada increasing numbers of young adults are disengaging from cyclical participation in lifelong learning. In this paper I explore this phenomenon in relation to federal neoliberal learning-and-work policy that focuses on cyclical lifelong learning and individual learner-worker development. I specifically consider two cases: the predicaments of young adults in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador and in Canada’s larger urban centers. I conclude with a call for a re-engendering of the social in contemporary lifelong learning that focuses on revitalizing critical concerns with ethics, justice, democratic vision, and learner freedom.

Introduction

The obvious danger in regarding lifelong learning as fundamentally an individual project is that as the public good aspect of lifelong learning is pushed to the side, the moral imperative of social needs is being sacrificed on the altar of individual choice. Lifelong learning for active citizenship and democracy cannot be reduced to an individual project. Instead civil society refers to how and when the basic values, conduct, and competencies of democracy are developed among citizens and puts focus, not on the individual but on the relationships between individuals, as well as collective aspirations to create a better society.

Kjell Rubenson, 2002, p. 245

In Canada, current federal learning-and-work policy is focused on cyclical lifelong learning and individual learner-worker development as ways to enhance the economic and the social (Grace 2004a & b; in press). In this paper I critique this neoliberal modus operandi that presumes that young adults ought to participate in lifelong learning as a socioeconomic cure-all on an ongoing basis. Drawing on Edwards (2000), I contest the view underlying this presumption; that is, the notion that lifelong learning is a cure for dislocation. To do this I explore the current national phenomenon indicating that increasing numbers of young adults are disengaging from cyclical participation in lifelong learning. In discussing their withdrawal from what they perceive to be a vicious circle of learning for work in an era of cyclical lifelong learning for control, I consider the devastating case of young adults in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. I also consider the similarly disturbing case of young adults in Canada’s larger urban centers. I use the substance of these cases to support Field’s (2000) assertion that neoliberalized lifelong learning has emerged to become a contributing factor to social inequity and exclusion. I then offer a critical social assessment of federal agency and council initiatives that address joblessness and the precarious nature of work for young adults by telling them that non-involvement in cyclical lifelong learning can lead to their social and economic exclusion. I conclude with a call for a re-engendering of the social in lifelong learning by revitalizing critical concerns with ethics, justice, democratic vision, and learner freedom.

More, More, More Lifelong Learning: How Do Young Adults Like It?

In its 1998 Report on Education in Canada, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) asserted that learning in school ought to emphasize enhancing students’
abilities to build knowledge, think critically, problem solve, and transfer skills from one area of study and practice to another. Taking a parallel stance in its 1999 education-and-training report entitled *Education Indicators in Canada*, the CMEC, working jointly with Statistics Canada, emphasized the importance of cyclical lifelong learning for building a skilled and flexible workforce. These aims exemplify the contemporary neoliberal ambition to enhance the economic (and, somehow, improve the social by default). Yet across Canada’s regions, many young adults—broadly considered to be 15 to 30 year olds in the current federal context—have trouble negotiating the intersections of life, learning, and work in the quest to lead happy, fulfilled, and productive lives. Many appear stuck in perennial transitions as they mediate a fundamentally changing work world where part-time, temporary, and contract work are pervasive. Despite current federal policy focused on cyclical lifelong learning and individual learner-worker development as ways to enhance the economic and the social, many Canadian young adults continue to experience difficulties becoming part of an educated, skilled, and flexible national workforce. Human Resources and Skills Development Canada acknowledges their plight:

The [Canadian] youth unemployment rate has consistently exceeded that of the adult population and has been more affected by the business cycle. Historically, the youth unemployment rate has been about twice the rate of the adult population. Young workers are often the ‘last hired and first fired’ because of their relative lack of seniority and experience. As a result, they have a higher turnover rate and, therefore, a higher unemployment rate than their older counterparts. (HRDC, 2002a, p. 2)

To deal with joblessness and the precarious nature of work, there is a general consensus that young adults and other learner-workers ought to participate in lifelong learning. This belief reflects a long-standing Canadian viewpoint that has equated engaging in learning for life and work with individual and national progress (Grace, 1997). In today’s neoliberal terms, participation is couched in terms of involvement in economistic 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 is 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 labour 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, 2002a). For them, inflexibility has become the marker of cyclical lifelong learning in which much of their involvement amounts to learning by conscription (Field, 2000). As such learning becomes “an internalized ‘ought’” (Cunningham, 1988, p. 141), the voluntary nature of participation in adult learning is relegated to the annals of history. Even worse, “the most coercive forms of conscription [to lifelong learning] are likely to be applied to those who stand outside the learning society, for whatever reason” (Field, 2000, p. 124).

The upshot of this conscripting learning culture should be problematic for those who subscribe to neoliberalized lifelong learning. This iteration of lifelong learning is not only failing to have its intended effect as a socioeconomic cure-all, but it is also driving some young adults away from participation in what they perceive to be a vicious cycle of lifelong learning (HRDC, 2002a). Indeed what we now construe as cyclical lifelong learning appears to have vestiges of Ohliger’s (1971) mandatory continuing education. And, in a twist on Ohliger’s understanding, the cyclical notion can also be seen to align with Deleuze’s understanding of permanent training as a new way to confine and control where “you don’t enclose people [like children in schools]
but instead multiply the means of control” (cited in Morss, 2003, p. 137). To escape escalating control a small but increasing number of young adults are avoiding lifelong learning and dropping out of the labour force, perhaps to be left behind as socioeconomic outcasts in the new economy (HRDC, 2002a, b, & c) and, more importantly, in life. This escapist scenario supports Field’s (2000) assertion: “Lifelong learning has itself become one key dimension in the process of social exclusion and inequality – not only in the sphere of employment and earnings, but also in such fields as consumption, individual well-being, health and citizenship” (p. 133). In this light, lifelong learning only contributes to dislocation.

Young Adults in Newfoundland and Labrador: No Apparent Way Out

This lifelong learning-and-work predicament has sorry individual and social consequences, which are amply demonstrated, for example, by the sad scenario discouraging and disenfranchising young adults in the Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. It is not only the province’s cod that have been decimated for more than a decade, but also its future – its young adults. In 2003 the province’s population of young adults was 103,845 (NLSA, 2003). It is expected to decline to 88,607 by 2010, and even further to 77,761 by 2016 (Govt. of NL, Dept. of Finance, 2002). In 2000, the provincial unemployment rate for young adults was 25.7% (StatsCan, 2004). During 2000-01, 93.8% of the province’s out-migrants were young adults (StatsCan/NLSA, 2002). During 2001-02, the provincial unemployment rate for young adults ranged from a low of 17.9% to a high of 27.5% (StatsCan, 2003). Comparing the high-end rate to Canadian unemployment statistics in 2000, it is more than double the national unemployment rate for young adults (aged 15 to 24) of 12.6%, and it is more than quadruple the overall national unemployment rate of 6.8% (StatsCan, 2004).

This social misery in Newfoundland and Labrador is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of young adults who have been employed 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 labour (11%) (Govt. of NL, 2003). These young adults are part of a cadre of workers whose despair and exploitation are hidden behind seductive titles like associate (Wal*Mart, 2004) and sandwich artist (Subway, 2003) that belie the poor wages and the lack of worker benefits that come with such contemporary labels. Using these job titles that give an air of importance to low-wage, tedious labour, multinational companies like Wal*Mart and Subway make big (yet often empty) promises to their young employees. These employers use inviting and careful rhetoric to make young learner-workers feel respected through offers of mentoring, success, and career mobility and advancement. All young adults have to do is put company success first by making customer service their priority. These companies are also astute at turning the precarious nature of contemporary work into an apparent advantage, suggesting they can provide work that fits with young adults’ lifestyles by offering part-time employment and flexible work hours. What the rhetoric of these companies belies is that flexibility today recasts work as precarious and many jobs as short-term and sporadic (Field, 2000). 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. In the end learner-workers are reduced to corporatized vagrants, wandering from job to job and workplace to workplace.
Exacerbating this 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. In 2003 the Royal Commission on youth that focused on strengthening the province’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 et al., 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 et al., 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 Canadian 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 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 continuously renew and upgrade in order to keep the nation’s economy globally competitive (CCDF, 2003).

No Escape in the Bright Lights of our Major Cities for Canada’s Young Adults

Young adults in Newfoundland and Labrador are not isolated in their experience of social misery in Canada. Across this country many other young citizens swell the ranks of the poor, the underemployed or jobless, and the homeless. Their plight has become particularly apparent in larger urban centers, which have become hollow endpoints for young adults’ migration toward the ethereal good life. In 2000 the unemployment rate for young adults in most high-density metropolitan areas was only slightly lower than the national rate of 12.6% (StatsCan, 2004). In Montréal the rate was 12.5%, while Toronto and Vancouver both had rates of 11.0% (StatsCan, 2004). In these urban settings, disenfranchised young adults are often stigmatized as social outcasts and misfit kids. Some are illiterate, unskilled and/or unemployed because education and government, continuing a pattern discernible since the 1950s of providing more education for the already educated (Grace, 1999, 2000), have failed to include them. When even cyclical lifelong learning is not for all, there is indeed cause for concern because a new classism that leaves certain citizens behind becomes increasingly apparent. Field (2000) offers this perspective:

The unskilled, unqualified and uneducated, it seems, are not only likely to face diminishing opportunities themselves; [apparently] 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. (p. 17)

This “lesser class” of citizens is considered the bane of the new economy. However, they should not be shunted aside. Indeed their dislocation ought to trouble providers of cyclical lifelong learning, as it raises a key question. How might educators address issues of access, accommodation, disposition, contexts, and relationships of power via lifelong learning so that the unskilled, unqualified, and uneducated are not dismissed from full participation in work and culture? In other words, how do we realize lifelong learning for all (OECD, 2000) in a socially responsive and responsible manner?

Even when they are lucky enough to be employed, it is no wonder that Canada’s young adults want and demand more. As learner-workers at the beginning of their work lives, work-life
balance is already ethereal. Increased stress, decreased job satisfaction, and increased roles are often associated with work, when they have it (CCDF, 2003). In this milieu, young adults offer this challenge to those involved in assisting 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 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

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

In this needs assessment, young adults are not asking for the sky, just their piece of the Canadian pie to which they are entitled as citizen learner-workers. Those of us engaged in lifelong learning in this country have a responsibility to respond, to help them get it.

The Economistic Role of Federal Agencies and Councils in Lifelong Learning in Canada

Thomas (1998) contends, “Neglect may be the major contribution of the new lifelong learning movement” (p. 356). If this is true, then how is the new lifelong learning movement neglecting young adults? And, in particular, how is the federal government contributing to this neglect? As Field (2000) maintains, “[S]tate-managed programmes are often ill-suited to the flexibility and adaptability of a post-Fordist labour market. Bureaucratic regulation and tight monitoring requirements tend to override the needs of individuals or employers” (p. 126).

In Canada, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) is the primary national agency that implements federal policy intended to build an educated, skilled, and flexible workforce with the capacity to contribute to the growth of the Canadian economy. This national agency, formerly called Human Resources Development Canada, asserts it will assist “Canadians to manage transitions in their lives by encouraging them to become self-reliant, invest in themselves and become more adaptable” (HRDC, 1998, p. 1). To this individualistic end, HRSDC frames lifelong learning as a “preventative measure” (p. 2) intended to produce a skill-competent and information-literate citizenry that will contribute to the prosperity of a knowledge-based economy and society. In keeping with the public to private shift in responsibility for learning apparent since the 1990s, individual training and development in which the individual is increasingly held responsible for participation and payment of costs is seen as a way to achieve this prosperity. However, there is not adequate research to support playing up a link between individual training and development and economic productivity (Edwards et al., 2002).

Still HRSDC (2004) is maintaining its instrumental, corporatized course. Currently, it mobilizes fourteen federal-government departments and agencies to work with business, labour, industry, not-for-profit and voluntary organizations, rural and remote communities, and all levels of government. With respect to young adults, the agency is promoting its Youth Employment Strategy (YES), which is a facet of its Innovation and Learning Strategy. YES was introduced in 1997 to keep the focus on producing a highly qualified and skilled national labour force. The strategy aims to help young adults develop a skill repertoire, information literacy, and work experience to make a successful transition to the workplace. Since 2003 the YES emphasis has
been on individual skill development so that the learner-worker remains a commodity. Indeed
what we are observing with YES is a shift from a project focus to a client-centered focus in the
federal government’s strategies for assisting young adults. This focus on individual needs and
skill development is built around a neoliberal pedagogy highlighting the transitory nature of the
utility of information and skills and the need to engage in lifelong learning on an ongoing basis.
This pedagogy emphasizes outcomes not process, and knowledge use not knowledge production.
With this pedagogy ascendant, it advances forms of neoliberal lifelong learning that have a
compulsory tinge. This reduces lifelong learning to a learner’s burden.

Engendering the Social in a Frayed Learning-and-Work Fabric

Canada has a highly educated workforce, and still the employed, underemployed, and
unemployed are all constantly told that they need more education, better education to have a
place in the new economy (Cruikshank, 2001, 2002). Yet how much more can we demand of
citizen learner-workers? After all, they already make significant life-and-time investments as
they engage in increasingly mandated learning to update their knowledge-and-skill competencies
and enhance their workplace performances (Aronowitz, 2000; Collins, 1998; Cruikshank, 2003a
& b; Field, 2000). This overkill frays the learning-and-work fabric, impairing work-life balance
and placing individuals at risk in regard to their personal health and their functioning in other
spheres such as family and community (Boshier, 2000, 2001; Fenwick, 2001; Grace, 2002a & b;
Rubenson, 2002). According to HRSDC, if lifelong learning as an individual project is
successful, then local communities and Canadian society as a whole will benefit (HRDC, 2000).
However, reflecting a federal pattern of failing the social in the realm of learning and work in
Canada (Grace 1999, 2000), the agency falls short in considering the complexity of the social,
ignoring the impact of disposition, context, and relationship on possible lifelong-learning
outcomes.

If HRSDC is to fulfill its mission, which is “to enable Canadians to participate fully in
the workplace and in the community” (HRDC, 2000, p. 1, italics added), then it will have to
engender and support forms of lifelong learning that attend to ethics, justice, and democracy in
policymaking and everyday practice. Under girding this move should be recognition of the
notion that full participation is eroded when lifelong learning is simply used as a stopgap
measure to address the work-related needs of an alienated contingent of functionally
unemployable Canadians (Grace, 1998). Moreover, as Rubenson’s (2002) opening quote
critically emphasizes, we cannot dismiss the public good in the rush to privatization. There are
social and moral consequences when we reduce lifelong learning to an individual project that
stifles proactive citizenship and democratic learning for life and work. We erode civility and
assault the integrity of learner-workers who witness an erosion of community and the strength of
the collective in the rush to neoliberalized, privatized learning.

This erosion is exemplified in another example from the province of Newfoundland and
Labrador. When a moratorium on cod fishing took away the livelihood of many fishers in the
early 1990s, these dislocated workers were pressured by government to engage in lifelong
learning in order to receive social/financial assistance. Not to participate in order to prepare for
new work would have, in a real sense, been tantamount to an erosion of their citizenship since
being a full and contributing citizen of a nation is usually considered synonymous with being
employed, paid, and productive. Many fishers participated in learning for work. However, they
were not consulted in decisions regarding the form, utility, or practicality of their learning. As a
result, these fishers often received knowledge-and-skills training that exacerbated their life-and-
work crises. Dislocation from the fishery was often compounded by dislocation from family and community when displaced fishers received knowledge-and-skills training that required them to move, often to another province, in order to find work. The effects of the cod moratorium, coupled with other socioeconomic upheaval in what has historically been one of Canada’s “have-not” provinces, have been profound. For example, according to national census data, the population of Newfoundland and Labrador dropped by 5.7% between 1991 and 2002, and it is the only Canadian province to show a declining population every year since 1998 (Statistics Canada, 1991/2002; 2002). I leave you with my update of the lyrics to the provincial anthem that reflects on the social tragedy of this population decline.

**Ode to Newfoundland**  
(New Millennium Version)  
*(with apologies to Sir Cavendish Boyle)*

When sunrays crown thy pine-clad hills  
And summer spreads her hand,  
Few youthful voices fill the air  
Of our once smiling land.  
The cod have gone; the youth are going.  
Who’ll guard thee Newfoundland?

When fishers were taken from their boats  
At government’s stern command,  
Through jobless days and sleepless nights  
Dignity slipped from their hands.  
Villages have died; fishers despair.  
Who can stay in Newfoundland?

When poverty and hurt fret thy shore  
And those left behind aren’t grand,  
With the Alberta advantage calling so many  
Life is ailing in our windswept land.  
Families have gone; grandparents sigh.  
What will happen to Newfoundland?

As loved our parents, so we love  
Where once they stood who’ll stand,  
Their prayer we raise to heaven above  
To rebuild our Newfoundland.  
Purity candies have grown stale.

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1 Sir Cavendish Boyle wrote the *Ode to Newfoundland* as the national anthem of the former Dominion during his tenure as British Governor (1901-04).
2 Alberta is Canada’s oil and resource rich province offering many opportunities for employment. Significant out migration of Newfoundlanders from communities on the island portion of the province to places like Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie have recast these western communities as little Newfoundlands.
3 Purity, a Newfoundland company that produces a variety of foods, makes peanut butter kisses and peppermint knobs. These candy are favourite local treats.
The grandchildren live away.
Who’ll guard thee Newfoundland?

References


