

Book Reviews/Recensions

WORK AND LEARNING: AN INTRODUCTION

Bruce Spencer and Jennifer Kelly. Thompson Educational Publishing, Toronto, 2013, 130 pages.

The field of work and learning crosses disciplines such as adult education, labour relations, human resource management, human resource development, and sociology, all of which investigate the subject from different perspectives, some critical and some less so. For students and scholars of this interdisciplinary topic, Spencer and Kelly's book aims to challenge dominant perspectives, particularly those cited in the human resource literature, by examining the social relations of work from the perspective of workers and worker empowerment. While the authors emphasize that the book is not meant to be a complete review of the field, they do draw on both Canadian and international research to examine critically various arguments and assumptions about work and learning. The book consists of eight chapters, with the first six focusing mainly on the Canadian context. The remaining two chapters expand the book's arguments of worker empowerment in relation to the international context.

The first three chapters articulate some of the contextual factors in which work and learning is situated. These chapters offer definitions for and critiques of key concepts found in the work and learning literature such as human capital, industrial/post-industrial society, organizational learning, and organizational culture. The first chapter in particular challenges common arguments and assumptions made in the human resource management literature about the relationship between learning, productivity, and competitiveness. It also asks readers to question the conditions and quality of work in the current economy. The second and third chapters draw attention to the inequities that exist in employment relations and the ways they are reproduced through the pedagogics of work and learning. Referring to statistics, academic research, and documentaries, these chapters illustrate how inequality continues to be reproduced despite claims made in the organizational learning literature that learning is meant to empower workers. In sum, the first three chapters demonstrate that discussions of work and learning cannot ignore the role of power, authority, equity, and ownership in employment relations.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 examine the relationship between work, learning, and schooling. Chapter 4 offers a concise overview of labour education and employee development schemes. The discussion of these often-overlooked contributors to workers' learning in the literature is situated within a critical examination of empowerment. Focusing on the historical development and ideological constructions attached to mass schooling, Chapter 5 examines the relationship between public education and work. Beginning with a brief description of the learning happening in indigenous communities prior to European contact through to the 19th and 20th centuries, the chapter is a synthesis of dominant educational philosophies and their influences on schooling and curricula. The chapter also analyzes the influence that neo-conservative ideology has had in producing regimes of accountability through standardized testing, which marginalizes discussions on education for broader

social purposes. Chapter 6 examines the transitions from work to schooling through the lens of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). After a look at the examples of PLAR and its potential benefits for adult learners, the chapter expands into a discussion on the problematic of assessing experiential learning. It raises questions about how certain forms of knowledge are valued to the exclusion of other skills and knowledge, comments on the challenges of documenting learning, and voices concerns on who benefits from PLAR. The chapter concludes with a summary of perspectives on PLAR in relation to workplace learning and the dynamic that exists in the academy in advocating for and resisting the acceptance of experiential learning. While the chapter raises concerns about PLAR schemes as they currently exist, it emphasizes that PLAR is an important aspect of adult learning for its recognition that valuable and relevant learning occurs beyond the academy. Combined, these three chapters illustrate some of the historical, political, and ideological connections between schooling, work, and post-secondary institutions.

The final two chapters pull together some outstanding issues with respect to gender, difference, and democratizing work. Chapter 7 employs the theme of transitions (attributed to scholars Peter Sawchuk and Alison Taylor’s edited collection) to discuss gender, difference, and skills training. The sections on gender and difference and culture and difference serve as an introduction to the barriers women and cultural groups encounter with respect to the division of labour in the workplace. The chapter then shifts to a broader discussion of skills and training and the role of education in relation to the economy. Overall, the chapter speaks to issues such as the recognition of skills, who receives training, and what form training should take (e.g., holistic or competency-based). Chapter 8 considers some of the challenges with democratizing work, empowering workers, and countering the problems associated with globalization. The chapter situates the discussion of these challenges in relation to the collapse of the Spectrum Sweater factory in Savar, Bangladesh, and argues that the literature on work and learning often fails to acknowledge the power relations that place workers in unsafe and precarious circumstances. Critiquing participatory strategic human resource management, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the Mondragon co-operatives as an example of reorganizing labour relations such that ownership and control remain in the hands of workers through a democratic governance structure.

Written in a concise 130 pages, Spencer and Kelly’s book offers a critical exploration of issues related to work and learning that are often marginalized in the mainstream human resource management literature. Scholars who are new to the field will find the book informative, while instructors teaching introductory courses on work and learning will find it helpful for broadening discussions to challenge commonly held assumptions.

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