

Book Reviews/Recensions

WORKERS' EDUCATION: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Philip G.H. Hopkins

Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1985.

Philip Hopkins offers us one of the few bona fide textbooks on that sector of adult education called "workers' education". He demarcates a field that caters to adults in their capacities as workers and especially as members of workers' organizations. It is the second part of this definition, "especially as members of workers' organizations," which places workers' education within adult education's radical tradition.

Hopkins does a commendable job in providing an historical and contemporary overview of "provided" workers' education, of non-formal learning activities organized for and by workers. The book's organizational scheme will be familiar to most adult educators: first it considers the educational objectives of workers' educational practice and then turns to what is provided, for whom, by whom and how it all comes about, financially, administratively and educationally.

What is provided under the banner of workers' education is, according to Hopkins, as broad as education itself: basic skills, organizational skills, technical and vocational training, economic, social and political studies and cultural, scientific and general education. While these categories are awkward, the scope of programs covered under these headings will probably surprise some. The book leaves us wondering, though, about the magnitude and impact of all this activity.

Hopkins' characterization of worker learners is almost identical to the now familiar characterization of adult learners: the worker-student is a volunteer, has life experience, is interested in solving real problems, etc. This is important, but it is old news to most adult educators. Far more interesting are the groups of learners Hopkins identifies; he includes not just "primary groups" within workers' organizations (elected representatives, staff and rank and file members) but categories such as women workers, rural workers, unemployed and migrant workers, shift workers and academic workers. Just thinking about the needs of these groups of learners challenges us to take account of their situation in the modern economy and the dominant culture.

Workers' education, says Hopkins, is provided by workers' movements, by voluntary associations, by public educational institutions and by governments. While the matter of "control" is a long standing and contentious issue in workers' education, Hopkins does not delve into this debate. He skips over the historical determinants of workers' educational activity in Britain, Germany, Canada, the U.S.A. and several African countries, tells us a bit about Workers' Educational Associations in Britain, Sweden and Sri Lanka, reviews university and college involvement

in workers' education in the United States, and outlines government attitudes and support for workers' education with particular attention to the cases of India, Canada and Singapore.

Hopkins tells us that workers' education is typically administered through complex arrangements involving hidden or indirect subsidies, government grants, special levies on workers, course fees and even employer contributions. Workers' education programmes vary as well from systemized progressive training programs to ad hoc courses designed to respond to particular problems at different times.

If the thirty seven pages of endnotes and references are any indication, *Workers' Education* is a well researched book. The author has relied mostly on secondary sources, which is not a problem when covering the British scene. There, workers' education has been a legitimate, albeit controversial, part of educational discourse since 1900. It is a problem when trying to cover what is going on in a country such as Canada where, aside from curriculum materials, virtually all there is to our "body of literature" on the subject is a single government report, a published conference proceeding, and one or two other documents.

Hopkins could be criticized for focusing on trade union education to the virtual exclusion of education in the co-operative movement, and on his attention to the role of central organizations in the shaping of workers' education to the exclusion of the role, or lack of one, of student and community interests. No doubt he was handicapped by the dearth of material exploring such concerns, itself indicative of the state of educational thought within progressive social movements.

Hopkins' work does not really succeed in making the case that workers' education is a special area of practice within adult education. Certainly this genre of book is not the best vehicle for making an argument. Another problem is that the author falls into the trap of pointing to some characteristics of good workers' education practice which he feels are unique but are not. The most obvious example is his suggestion that workers' education is student-centred, participatory and experience-based. Few adult educators will see this as buttressing a claim for distinctiveness.

The heart and soul of workers' education, like any other educational sector, lies in the philosophy and ideals of those who provide and undertake it. In Chapter Three, Hopkins reports on the motives and objectives behind workers' education with surprisingly little apparent feel for his subject. One gets the impression that Hopkins, the experienced activist, has tried too hard to be Hopkins, the objective academic, in his effort to give us a glimpse into the debate engendered by the likes of Mansbridge, Lovett, and Gramsci. Hopkins makes mention of key issues: the link between individual development and social action, the role of education in stabilizing society versus education as instrument of social change, of "counter-cultural" development, reform and emancipation. The

"vital point" the author leaves us with in respect to these issues is that "many factors are at work determining the thrust of workers' education in different countries at different times." This is no way to handle the most important debate in education! These issues should impart considerable colour, if not some organization, to the entire book. The fact that they do not is surely the most disappointing aspect of Hopkins' work.

Hopkins' book is the quintessential workers' education tour guide. We get an overview of the countryside, lots of pieces of information and a few personal comments along the way. However, we do not come away with a feel for the essence of the place. It provides us with a good introduction to the world of workers' education, one that will be of particular interest to adult education administrators, and policy makers, but it suffers, like any taxonomy, from categories that not everyone will find helpful. Like any "world overview," it is frustratingly short of the kind of description and analysis that stimulates both the heart and the mind.

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