

Book Reviews/Recensions

EDUCATION & JOBS: EXPLORING THE GAPS

D. W. Livingstone (Ed.). University of Toronto Press, Toronto, ON, 2009, 382 pages.

This book is based on the results of two surveys on the perceived and actual differences between employees' educational and training background, on the one hand, and the actual requirements of their current job on the other. Both surveys were conducted in 2004. The Education-Jobs Requirements Matching survey (EJRM) reached about 1,700 non-managerial employees in Ontario, while the larger Work and Lifelong Learning survey (WALL) collected information throughout Canada (n=9,063). They follow up on the smaller New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) review done in 1998. This is not the first publication on the topic, and most adult educators in Canada are already familiar with the sizeable opus of publications born from the latest round of WALL surveys. We can safely say that the main government funding agency, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), got its money's worth, largely thanks to Dr. Livingstone, I presume.

What the book does, however, is concentrate in a single publication the most comprehensive analysis of the data to date, together with some descriptive stats on the differences between the early 1983 Canadian Class Structure figures, the 1998 NALL study, and the 2004 WALL and EJRM surveys. The result is a book that every adult educator will want on their bookshelf as a useful reference tool and a bullet-proof reminder that (1) Canada's workforce is better prepared than policy-makers would have us believe, and (2) workers themselves are the first to recognize on-the-job learning as crucial to maintaining their employment competency. No need for carrots and sticks here, Mr. HR Manager, but how about a little support and recognition?

The first three chapters of the book give us some detailed background on what could only be called the sociology of employment and credentialism. We are introduced to some central concepts such as the difference between the "credentials needed to *get* a job and those required to *do* the job" (p. 34) and the importance of "collective informal learning" in the workplace (p. 26). We are also told that, since 1983, the proportion of workers who considered themselves "overqualified" increased from 30% to 40% not only in Canada, but also in Britain where figures are available (p. 43). The trend, according to the authors, can be extrapolated to all advanced capitalist societies (p. 52).

Chapters 4 and 5 present a series of graphs and pie charts that at first seem daunting simply because there are so many of them, and they are so detailed as to be bewildering. We are presented with several quantified demographic descriptions (type of work done, by whom, levels of schooling, by economic sector, etc.) along with employee perceptions of their credential match (pre-service schooling, on-the-job learning, perceived degree of managerial responsibilities, etc.).

Normally I would have skipped the whole thing and concentrated on the more comfortable qualitative descriptions in chapters 6 to 11. But descriptive statistics can paint a

compelling picture. For example, the most often cited source of learning from all categories of employees turns out to be "my own independent efforts," followed by "co-workers," and, at the bottom of the pile, "employer training programs." The proportion of workers who have completed a post-secondary degree has risen from 22% to 56% since 1983. About 35% of employed workers describe their job as "mismatched" to their qualifications. These seemingly dry figures tell the story of an increasingly ravenous industrial world that resorts to educational credentialism as a means to justify its ever-growing pressure on wages and productivity. It is one thing to say something like this; it is quite another to prove it, and this book does just that.

The third part of the book is a collection of in-depth ethnographic descriptions of the daily experiences of five groups of workers. They are reminiscent of Louis "Studs" Terkel's 1974 classic book, *Working*, where people were asked to "talk about what they do all day and how they feel about what they do." The stories should be particularly interesting to professionals in each field examined in the book. Teachers, for example, report increasing demands on accountability and an erosion of their professional union's credibility. Computer programmers warn against the loss of productivity associated with employee turnover, as it takes several months, or years, to gain the idiosyncratic knowledge required for competency in a specific company. I will let the reader sniff out their own nuggets from the chapters on clerical workers, two tiers of auto workers, and persons with disabilities.

The most riveting analysis in this third section of the book, however, is K. V. Pankhurst's comments on an "integrated theory of work and learning" (Chapter 6). Our world has progressed from a Fordist assumption that workers should be allowed as little initiative as possible, to one where economic empires are built on the creative works of millions of unpaid labourers (e.g., YouTube). Pankhurst questions the notion of "skill" by pointing out that the implicit contract of all employment contains an unknown clause, since "employers are unable to describe in full detail the content of a job." The obvious corollary here is that *all* employment falls in the category of "problem-solving."

A final word of congratulations to Daiva Villa/Chris Rowat Design for a very attractive format and cover, and especially for the choice of the painting by Angela Livingstone on C1.

This book is definitely a classic and will sit well for years to come on the shelves of educators and researchers, alongside other masterpieces such as Terkel's *Working* or Ravenswood's *The Revival of American Labor*.

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