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Book Review

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Book Reviews

LIFELONG LEARNING AS CRITICAL ACTION: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON PEOPLE, POLITICS, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

André P. Grace. Canadian Scholars' Press, Toronto, 2013, 298 pages.

In his book, André Grace interrogates the meaning of lifelong learning—its historical perspective, its contemporary implications, and its reconfigured possibility. Recursively, Grace draws out historical and contemporary issues that shore up his argument for lifelong learning as critical action. He raises questions about what constitutes worthwhile learning, quality work, and the good life and proposes an interpretation that encompasses and nurtures social engagement, political and economic understanding, and cultural work to benefit all citizens as learners and workers. Grace provides a perspective of lifelong learning as a multidimensional historical and contemporary phenomenon with the potential to address instrumental, social, and cultural concerns through a more holistic approach to learning. He proposes, “This blueprint for critical action helps situate lifelong learning as praxis that brings *the critical* to bear on everyday life” (p. 212). The author begins by examining hegemonic neoliberal assumptions and brings to the fore the omissions of that perspective, which when paid attention to have the potential to achieve holistic, proactive, and inclusive learning for all. The book is a robust, eclectic work that weaves writing style (academic writing interspersed with poetry, narrative vignettes, and first-person reflection), historical reflection, and contemporary global thinking with an intimate personal experience and vision. The research is wide and deep, and the call for change is authentic and passionate.

While Grace is clear to say that he values instrumental and economic expectations of lifelong learning, he sees them in a complex intersection with social, historical, cultural, and political concerns. In each successive chapter, Grace scaffolds his argument for lifelong learning as critical action: a phenomenon that connects all learning (e.g., formal, informal, non-formal) from a holistic perspective in which citizens are political change agents who are able to think, speak, and act.

In Chapter 2, Grace provides a synopsis of the nature and meaning of neoliberal thinking and its epistemological and ontological influence on lifelong learning. In doing so, he gives the reader a point of reference—a method for critique in the chapters that follow. Grace argues that in its current iteration, lifelong learning upholds neoliberal values aimed at strengthening economic output with the optimism that there are social benefits as a “side effect” (p. 91). This, he argues, is misguided, noting in particular that neoliberal principles undermine an inclusive society and perpetuate social exclusion and injustice. Grace asserts that social learning for cultural transformation goes against the grain of neoliberal politics and that lifelong learning construed in neoliberal terms is negligent in providing access and accommodation to all citizens. Historically, what began as “a way out” (p. 100) or a way to move forward just became another “stricture” (p. 100) in learning.

Grace adds that with the various change forces associated with neoliberal formation (e.g., information technology, globalization, corporatism, privatization, government absconding, reductionism, individualism) and “within a nexus of unequal power relations” (p. 82), lifelong learning has “become chameleonic in nature” (p. 101), exacerbating what Grace sees as an ongoing and episodic crisis of the social.

In light of history and contemporary events (e.g., the 2008 economic debacle), Grace evokes an urgency to reconsider neoliberal postulation—he does this with a comprehensive study of both local and global lifelong learning initiatives. In Chapter 4, he reflects on and summarizes the lifelong learning deliberations during the year 2000 in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, and then in Chapter 5 he examines lifelong learning policy cultures of Canada and other late-capitalist economies (e.g., Australia, New Zealand, Republic of Ireland, and South Africa). Grace highlights Canadian government policy as it relates to the country’s youth, pointing out that neoliberal assumptions (e.g., privatization and individualism) aggravate the situation for learners by blaming individuals for their failure in learning—inciting a fatalism and despair. He speaks of how the dislocation (to find work) of so many young people from Newfoundland and Labrador works against social cohesion and intensifies a politic of blame. The book also discusses how neoliberal beliefs downplay systemic issues and destructive cultural forces (e.g., heterosexism) that socially ostracize and damage citizens who are then subjected to a further assault of blame—that they somehow brought these social forces upon themselves. Grace exposes a neoliberal narrative for subaltern learners—sexual minorities, women, immigrants, Aboriginal, and youth—and asks how these assumptions shape citizenship, concluding that neoliberal policies are not committed to inclusion and justice for all learners across relationships of power.

I was deeply impressed by the depth of research that Grace weaves throughout the book, directing a lens on a number of rich perspectives, histories, and issues that speak for his argument for a more holistic approach to lifelong learning. I found myself at times defined by my own hegemonic attachment to a neoliberal perspective (Western, white, Christian) and thought Grace to be naively idealistic in his thinking—that I live in a world where injustice and deficit exist. It is a fallen place where this will always be and always negotiated. Most of us feel lucky to be on the better side of that injustice, not realizing or acknowledging our own complicity to oppression and prejudice. Grace challenges us to think differently, to pull off the neoliberal blinders and to view, as he points out, “hopeful possibility” (p. 239). We do not choose, he declares, a myth of apocalypse, nor one of neoliberal progress; rather like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we choose hopeful possibility . . . a dream. Grace calls for lifelong learning as a transformative practice, as a refuge for all learners—agents able to assert their free will and autonomy—and a counter pedagogy to a neoliberal view. As a final note, and one that has a power to shift our thinking, Grace opens our eyes to a deeper meaning of education, of learning from the outset to the conclusion of life. Grace’s tribute to his father is resonating—a life of learning in a small fishing village, a transformed life from being an ordinary citizen to one that was truly extraordinary. Grace finds new places for education, and in so doing he legitimizes a whole other realm of knowing and learning . . . one that brings new respect and dignity for all.

The book is useful for university and college courses that focus on policy making and practice dimensions of lifelong learning. It is an evocative read for scholars who are

interested in a critique of the current neoliberal influence in lifelong learning and offers hopeful thinking for all of society, but especially for those citizens on the margins.

Cathy VanderVliet,
Brock University

PURPOSES OF ADULT EDUCATION: AN INTRODUCTION (3RD ED.)

Bruce Spencer and Elizabeth Lange. Thompson Educational Publishing, Toronto, 2014, 228 pages.

Spencer and Lange's 228-page book on the purposes of adult education provides a great introduction to the field of Canadian adult education. Seven chapters cover the topics of adult education foundations, the sociology of adult education, education for the economy, education for transformation, education for diversity, distance education, and education within a global context. As a beginning graduate student, I would have greatly benefitted from having a copy of Spencer and Lange's text as a resource, and have thus decided to write my review by describing how readers might want to approach this book.

1. *Use this as a reference book.* I was initially frustrated in reading the first few chapters, as they didn't seem to flow as a book. However, as I progressed in my reading, it dawned on me that this is more like an encyclopaedia or reference than anything else. And as a reference book, it works well. If you're interested in learning more about the Canadian political economy and the rise of neo-liberalism, read Chapter 7. If you want to know more about transformative learning, turn to Chapter 4. If you want to immerse yourself more in the debates, read the final discussions at the end of each chapter. These help to familiarize the reader with different positions on specific topics and present evidence to support and negate certain points of view.
2. *Realize that the book is about Canada but also much more.* When I first started reading, I was surprised at how the book went back and forth between focusing on Canada and then on adult education more broadly. The book lays out the main philosophical influences in adult education, such as behaviourism, liberalism, humanism, or radicalism, and introduces us to many of the key thinkers in adult education who are primarily American; e.g., Jack Mezirow and John Dirkx. It also speaks about historically important Canadian adult education movements, such as Antigonish and Frontier College. I wondered at times, though, why important Canadian adult educators weren't recognized. For example, in the discussion on new social movements, I was hoping to see the work of Budd Hall or Dip Kapoor mentioned. And this brings me to the next point:
3. *Recognize that while the book does a lot, it doesn't do everything.* Because there are so many concepts, ideas, and thinkers covered in this short book, you may start wondering why certain topics are covered in depth while others receive little to no attention. For example, I was very happy to see a detailed discussion on the differences between critical