

**Book Review**

# Work and Learning: An Introduction

Bruce Spencer and Jennifer Kelly  
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Bruce Spencer and Jennifer Kelly intend their primer on work and learning to be a cross-disciplinary and critically orientated introductory text on adult workplace learning in liberal welfare states, a field that the authors acknowledge as lacking in common consensus concerning the limits and boundaries of study. Rather than introducing workplace learning as part of other fields of study, such as the sociology of work or critical political economy, this book represents the more recent scholarly work of several prominent researchers and theorists within education subdisciplines that have carved out an increasingly distinct genre. Educational scholarship within the field of work and learning often comes from a reactionary perspective, critically attuned to how education has been co-opted under a capitalist mode of relations. As Spencer and Kelly highlight throughout the book, the repercussions of capitalism are particular within the current era of neoliberalism, a subject which cannot be ignored within work and learning.

Social and economic influence under neoliberalism is argued to reframe education as ongoing self-investment incumbent upon a worker for success within a knowledge economy. Spencer and Kelly's "critical vocationalism" (p. 88) attends to this so-called post-industrial framework to address inequalities inherent within this understanding of learning for work. Their book, while just over 100 pages long, covers significant ground within its eight chapters, examining the multifaceted forms of tension between critical and normative perspectives through topics such as managerialism, employer- and employee-initiated learning, prior learning assessment, and democratic forms of work and learning. Grounding their analysis of these aspects of work and learning is a critical orientation with respect to exactly who benefits when learning dovetails with the "desire to extract more from each employee" (p. 52).

While focus is placed primarily on adult learning from the 1990s onward, a vast exploration of the history of education in Canada is given in the middle of the book, moving from voluntary and informal education of the 1850s to the Canadian Indian Residential School system, progressivism, and neo-conservatism reform that primarily supported vocationally-relevant curriculum in the 1990s. This vocationalism of education is situated within the current era of neo-conservatism, of which the authors provide an overview of the pervasive ideologies that shape educational reform. These dominant understandings often propagate the necessity of vocationally relevant education above all other intents and interests. As the rest of the book examines, this shift deeply affects how occupational learning is situated and the social relations that emerges from it. Vocationalism is shown to take place at multiple levels of education, bringing relevance to readers who may come from other educational sectors or have modest interest in workplace learning. Organizational spaces come to influence one another, as

educational institutions, workplaces, and industry are presented as relational, although differing in levels and forms of coordination.

Given the breadth of scholarship within the area of work and learning, the book moves rapidly between different institutional structures and forms of social relations that connect education and the labour market. The beginning of the book is orientated toward employer and human resource perspectives, which largely place the contemporary study of work and learning within functionalist and managerialist frameworks. Emerging in the early 1990s, these frameworks had proponents evidenced in authors such as Peter Senge, who sought to maximize the output of workers, often denying the possibility of divergent interests within the workplace. Spencer and Kelly seek to challenge this perspective, especially concerning the way in which functionalist and managerialist frameworks optimistically assumes positive transformation due to post-industrial change, economic globalization, and increased productivity. Occupational training is woven into the structure of new organizational culture, often framing workplace training as individually orientated human capital and manpower investment aligned with new management profit-maximizing techniques of control.

The knowledge and skill of workers becomes implicated within changing conceptions of work, reorganizing how learning is constituted and supported under shifting employment relations. Different forms of labour organization—such as collaborative work and self-supervising work groups—lead Spencer and Kelly to consider pluralistic interpretations and assessments of workplace learning. These changes are critically assessed, considering the possibilities and limitations that employer-initiated learning has for the power and agency of employees, especially when considering intersections of inequality. Nevertheless, the authors maintain the perspective that workplace learning is not closed to emancipatory possibilities, a subject that is never far from the reader's attention.

As considered in Chapter 4, employee-initiated learning holds possibilities for social justice, especially through proactive and reactive labour and union-based education and training. A gamut of examples are provided, from the *Justice for Janitors* campaigns that provide education to secure better working conditions to the *Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership*, which focuses on skill upgrading within existing employment. Closely related are employee development schemes, which provide full or partial funding to support employee education not necessarily directly related to job-training. While these initiatives seek to alleviate labour market and workplace inequalities and may be advantageous to both employers and employees, Spencer and Kelly keep a critical eye attuned to claims of empowerment that often undergird such efforts. The authors' suggest that a more holistic framework of training is needed, one that is not strictly focused on vocational training for the interests of employers and firms.

While individual concerns and interests outside of the workplace must be taken into account, the plurality of concerns and claims within the field of work and learning is difficult to disentangle. Educational institutions are shown to be greatly implicated, not only through the expectation that they provide the necessary skills for employment but also in the increasing requirement that they assess prior learning and skills. A central aspect of this book is found in Spencer and Kelly's exploration of the tension between school and work, implicit within discussions concerning prior learning assessment and recognition.

Given that formal learning is often understood to offer knowledge exploration and mastery leading to recognition, prior learning assessment implicates adult learning in terms of how knowledge is measured, deemed exchangeable, or worthy of credit. The authors frame this issue in terms of the possibility for recognizing the skills of disadvantaged groups and opening higher

education up to real world necessities, while raising questions concerning “the transferability of knowledge, and dilution of the critical, social, emancipatory purposes of education” (p. 73). As within many forms of educational change, alleviating inequality in one respect leads to reinforcement in another, and the authors look to critical and feminist scholarly work to consider how knowledge claims within school and work must be examined in reference to what is absent or given limited consideration. Thus, the complexity of workplace learning is shown to affect more than just spaces of employment, as it is situated within discussion surrounding the relationship between educational institutions, the labour market, and capitalism.

One excellent addition to the literature on work and learning is found in the way this book reframes understandings of work and learning simply beyond the workplace, casting learning as a series of complex transitions beyond just simply school-to-work. These transitions, flows, and overlaps between spaces of work and learning differ along axes of identity, difference, context, and relations of power. Through examining transitions that individuals and groups make, the authors make particular forms of inequality visible. For example, examining the labour market transitions for recently landed immigrants or technological skill upgrading for older adults highlights the way in which learning and work takes a particular form for specific segments of a population. How work and learning transitions are gendered is given substantial consideration, including aspects related to stratification within the labour market, sexual harassment, work hierarchies, and “ghettoized” (p. 91) employment positions.

Work and learning transitions, however, are not simply understood as individualistic but are structured under specific political, social, and economic processes. Governmental policies and structural measures often promote certain forms of education for labour market integration, such as programs intending to alleviate unemployment through raising the human capital of specific groups. Problematizing the supply side of employment relations, workfare measures are understood as a technology that “disciplines the unemployed” (p. 93) and shifts attention away from employers’ responsibility for training. As the last part of this book demonstrates, a nexus of relations among employees, employers, educational institutions, and the state frame the field of work and learning. Furthermore, boundaries between each sector and group cannot always be clearly drawn or considered in isolation, especially, if viable alternatives are to be established.

The last chapter of the book considers the challenges of democratizing work and learning, focusing on both global shifts concerning the movement of production and manufacturing to the *Global South* and the possibilities and limits of alternative modes of work and learning. Case studies examining the devastation and social and economic marginalization that results from global systems of manufacturing are explored, including the Spectrum Sweater Factory collapse in Savar, Bangladesh. Given the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in this same region, Spencer and Kelly most likely did not realize how significant this example would be at the time of writing. Such an addition within this book shows again that the subject of work and learning cannot be separated from capitalist relations of inequality.

While international agencies monitoring working conditions and providing aid and support to workers are considered one possibility to alleviate how transnational corporations implicate local populations, Spencer and Kelly look to the possibility of the democratization of work through unionization, workplace learning, and worker-owned enterprises, providing the case example of Mondragon cooperatives within Spain. The integration of work and learning through the development of technical training and other education institutions is holistically built alongside labour practices within this cooperative. Unfortunately, how aspects of this model may be adopted and put into practice by communities and groups is given somewhat limited

discussion in the book. One question that extends from the authors' discussion concerns how alternative and democratic models affect the relationship between work and learning and what alternative possibilities arise.

One example of such an endeavour is found in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, where a grassroots economic alternative program named Groundswell has just been launched. Individuals come together through this alternative business school to rethink the economic logic of capitalist ventures and entrepreneurship, while considering the possibilities for creative and innovative forms of business. Nevertheless, traditional business skills are learned in order to be refashioned into alternative possibilities, a process that is by no means straightforward. What is interesting about this model, however, is the emphasis that to work in a different way, one must learn in a different way. The school incorporates intense work on the individual and embeds community in the curriculum alongside business training.

Spencer and Kelly give examples of those initiatives that seek to combat workplace inequality within the logics of capitalism. However, what is perhaps missing is rumination on initiatives such as Groundswell, a program that is certainly not the sole example, which tackles the very logic that undergirds current modes of training for the workplace. We might question, given the authors' delineation of the field of work and learning, whether capitalist imperatives need to be more directly attacked through technical training rather than learned about in a sphere outside of our understanding of training for the workplace. Nevertheless, as a primer on work and learning in Canada, Spencer and Kelly's book successfully meets the intent set in the introduction, skillfully introducing key concepts and significant areas of study, while charting limitations and gaps within the field.

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