

“Class” is in Session: Activism and Adult Learning in Unpaid Post-Secondary Student Practicums

Alexandru Caldararu, University of Alberta, Canada

Abstract: This paper will explore the phenomenon of unpaid student practicums and their proliferation within contemporary post-secondary education. Although practicums undoubtedly provide for powerful opportunities to link theory with practice in ways that can transform an individual's ontology and epistemology, it is important to recognize that opportunities to “learn by doing” do not appear by happenstance. More specifically, this paper will use several theoretical perspectives and my own extensive experiences with mandatory, unpaid practicums to interrogate the learning that happens in these environments. It will argue that the emergence of a particularly active Intern Rights Movement in Québec in recent months represents not only a growing resistance to the lessons of the “hidden curriculum” of unpaid work experiences, but a “spiraling back” towards adult education's activist roots as a movement for social change.

Keywords: Practicums, Hidden Curriculum, Intern Rights, Neoliberalism, Adult Education, Post-Secondary Education, Adult Learning

Introduction

The field of adult education has undergone seismic shifts in Canada over the past half-century. Loosely defined as the approaches, processes, and activities that facilitate adult learning in a formal learning environment (Nesbit, 2006), adult education emerged as part of a broader movement for social reform. Adult education has since evolved into one of the key ideological battlegrounds between powerful neoliberal forces who seek to advance the narrative that individuals are ultimately responsible for their own personal well-being, and those who maintain that adult education has an important role to play in the advancement of the common good (Spencer & Lange, 2014). Despite these contestations, the post-secondary sector continues to double-down on its embrace of neoliberalism (which is most clearly seen in the adoption of corporate branding campaigns that highlight offerings of “workforce relevant” programming) (Einstein, 2015).

This paper will explore adult learning at the post-secondary level and the proliferation unpaid student practicums within contemporary post-secondary education. For the purposes of this discussion, practicums will be defined as “supervised work experiences required to become a practicing professional” (Sattler, 2011, p. 35). Although practicums undoubtedly provide for powerful opportunities to link theory with practice in ways that can transform an individual's ontology and epistemology, it is important to recognize that opportunities to “learn by doing” do not appear by happenstance. More specifically, this paper will use several theoretical perspectives and my own extensive experiences with mandatory, unpaid practicums to interrogate the learning that happens in these environments. It will argue that the emergence of a particularly active Intern Rights Movement in Québec in recent months represents not only a growing resistance to the lessons of the *hidden curriculum* of unpaid work experiences, but a “spiraling back” towards adult education's activist roots as a movement for social change.

Activism: The Root of the Adult Education Movement

It is useful to begin this discussion with an examination of the activist origins of adult education. In Canada, the adult education movement first appeared as part of a wider push to advance goals of social reform and/or justice (Barnetson, 2018). These efforts were community-based in scope, and located within the context of broader social movements (such as the women's, union, and co-operative movements). Given the reality of Canada's (relatively) small and dispersed population following the colonization of Turtle Island, a sense of collectivity among the settler populations was required for survival (Nesbit, 2013). Thus, the first adult education initiatives in Canada occurred among workers in the mining, fishing, and forestry sectors, and were aimed towards developing the capacity of individuals to exert more control in the economic and social spheres of their local communities (Spencer & Lange, 2014).

If we accept Olli's (2011) contention that activism represents a form of community development where people search for optimal opportunities to act in order to advance a particular agenda, then we can say that from its very origins, adult education (if not the broader concept of adult learning itself) is not simply “activist” at its core, but is fully ensconced within the realm of critical theory. This link is further demonstrated in Brookfield's (2005) contention that critical theory is a body of knowledge that helps people construct a new social reality for themselves (Olli, 2011). Insofar as we acknowledge that a “theory” represents an explanation for the world as it is and being

“critical” implies that a person develops an independent analysis of how power operates in their communities (thus providing them with tools needed to consciously exert more control over their lives), we can further surmise that any discipline concerned with the linking of personal experiences to underlying social structures, the plight of less privileged, and the linking of personal experiences to underlying social structures can be considered a social movement greatly influenced by a passionate group of committed activists (Nesbit, 2013).

Furthermore, if one conceives of a social movement as an organized group of individuals that directly challenge institutional authority (while existing outside the parameters of “official channels” for political discourse or action; Hall, 2006) and recognizes adult education’s historical predisposition towards critical theory, then it stands to reason that the kind of *informal learning* that occurs within social movements had a direct impact on the development of *formal* educational programs geared towards adults (Chovanec, Lange, & Ellis, 2008). This connection becomes all the more apparent if learning is conceived as an inherently *social* process that has the potential to transform individuals and communities alike.

Educators who employ a more critical lens understand that there is a dialectical relationship between learning theory and educational practice, and between the various roles that exist within a formal classroom (through the interpersonal interactions between students and teachers, and between students and other students). In other words, individual and collective learning processes mutually constitute one another, and thus cannot be viewed as separate if one accepts that adult education is a social process. Moreover, the contention that personal perspective transformations will result in a progressive evolution of human society overlooks the fact that often times, people do not participate in collective social actions, even though they may agree with the objectives and desired outcomes of the action (out of fear for safety, the privileging of engagement with other activities, etc.; Kilgore, 1999). Individualistic understandings of transformative learning overlook the fact that human society is an outcome of cooperative human activity *plus* the way we interpret and make meaning of these labours (Carpenter, 2012). Our successes and failures (and our interpretations of them), would not be possible if we existed as islands unto ourselves, and our world is thus constructed by the work that we do *in concert* with others (an understanding that affirms notions of social justice and collective action that formed the basis of the nascent adult education movement).

The Unpaid Practicum: A Neoliberal Shift

Neoliberalism can be defined as “the agenda of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market” (Connell, 2013, p. 100). As a result, this process invokes a culture within society with the private, profit-seeking corporation becoming the model to emulate in a reconstituted social and public order. Thus, under neoliberal parameters, the purpose of education becomes less about the production, transmission, and acquisition of knowledge for the advancement of the common good, and more about the generation of human capital to address labour market needs deemed important by external partners of colleges and universities (most of whom are deeply connected to the private sector; Allais, 2012).

In addition, the Business/Higher Education Roundtable (2016) of Canada defines WIL as “the process through which students come to learn from experiences in educational settings...it includes curriculum and pedagogic practices that assist, provide, and integrate learning experiences in both settings” (p. 4). While this definition in and of itself sounds innocuous, as will be discussed below, in practice this often means that students must complete unpaid practicums to obtain these experiences. As such, the proliferation of unpaid practicums are one of the more recognizable consequences of the neoliberalization of post-secondary education.

However, it is also important to recognize the many important theories of adult learning that can be expressed through WIL components of post-secondary education, one of which is experiential learning. Experiential learning is a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of meaningful personal experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and it operates in two ways that are different, yet related (in a post-secondary education context).

The first is that prior learning may be brought by a student to a new environment, and that the lessons learned from these prior experiences provide the basis for new lessons to be learned. The second is that new experiences encountered by students become the prime source (and impetus) for future learning. While a reliance on a student’s prior learning can necessitate some “un-learning” of prejudiced ideas, the ultimate goal of experiential learning is the development of a dialectical relationship between students and their environment, where socially-learned

knowledge is used in a way that is unconstrained by the meaning learners have constructed out of their own personal experiences (Sumner, 2018).

In addition, WIL lends itself very well to the concept of situated learning. Situated learning refers to how meaning-making in learning is a process of social negotiation between an individual and the world around them, and contends that thinking, learning, and knowing occur as the result of people engaged in activity arising from a socially and culturally constructed world. In other words, the historical conditions that gave rise to ongoing human activity is where learning and communicating *in* and *with* broader society is situated (Lave, 1991). On a practical level, what this means is that communities of practice are the sites where individuals gain the knowledge that they will need in order to achieve their learning goals and engage in *meaningful* activities that will allow for the social reproduction of human society. More specifically, this process is dialectical in there is a clear relationship between “newcomers” (who are learning how to become productive members of the community) and “oldtimers” (who are charged with leading communities of practice). Both sets of people need one another if the community of practice is to survive (new people need to learn from the old, and the old will need the new to learn from them if they are to be replaced and be effective leaders; Lave, 1991).

Much of the academic literature that discusses practicums suggests that students gain insight into the inner workings of their chosen professions as well as the opportunity to develop “soft” skills that will enable them to more easily make the post-graduation transition to employment (such as communication and networking skills, job search skills, etc.; Sattler, 2011). These skills are developed through collective experiences in both the classroom environment and placement sites, as students learn from their peers, co-workers, mentors, and if possible, clients that they work with (Business/Higher Education Roundtable, 2016). However, what distinguishes practicums from other forms of WIL (such as co-op’s, field placements, apprenticeships, etc.) is that most practicums are tied to specific program learning outcomes and professional registration requirements, and *thus are mandatory components of the program they are attached to* (Sattler, 2011).

Lessons learned in practicum are action-oriented (involving the completion of some combination of tasks and activities relevant to the agency mentoring the student), dialogical (based on communication with colleagues and/or mentors), and central to the evolution of a student’s professional self-identity to include new learned behaviours that permit them to join an established community of practice (and thus be part of a group of people who share a passion for the work they do, and collaborate to achieve their common goals; Sumner, 2018).

Furthermore, it is through the act of critical reflection that the lessons learned in practicum settings can cause a student to undergo a paradigm shift in their worldviews. While reflective practice refers to the development of a professional *praxis* (whereby a student thinks about how knowledge gained in the classroom is relevant to work they do in their communities of practice; Ixer, 1999), the act of reflection does not necessarily imply that a person is adopting a “critical” orientation to their understanding of their life’s experiences. As discussed above, to engage in a critical analysis, a person must relate their experiences to the exercise of power in the community, link their own experiences to broader social structures, and ask *why* the status quo is the way it is (and whose interests it serves; Brookfield, 2009). For example, a student can engage in reflective practice when they interrogate their own performance in a setting that had them assist with the client intake process.

The same reflection would take on a much more critical orientation if they were to focus on clients who were upset by questions that were asked in the intake process, and then try to determine the extent to which the *intake process itself* may be creating barriers to service that further marginalize already vulnerable individuals. The use of reflective journals in practicum courses provides an ideal opportunity for students to develop and demonstrate their (critically) reflective skills. Journal entries allow for students to document the meanings they construct from their practicum experiences, and to use these meanings to question (and then replace) “common sense” assumptions on the flow of power that normalize inequity, compassion, and connectedness between people (Brookfield, 2009).

In sum, multiple theories of adult learning discuss the benefits of providing students with opportunities to engage with theoretical knowledge in an applied setting. In addition, experiential learning situated within robust communities of practice can facilitate the development of powerful transformative experiences (on an individual and social level), and as such, there is great potential for learning that occurs in practicums to act as a conduit for meaningful (if not radical) social change. However, mandating unpaid practicums within the curriculum of post-

secondary education creates opportunities for student labour to be exploited, and it is this “hidden curriculum” that will be discussed in the following section of this paper.

The Hidden Curriculum of the Unpaid Student Practicum

While the more positive aspects of student participation in unpaid practicums have been discussed above, it is important to recognize that the proliferation of unpaid practicums in post-secondary education has other implications for adult education. One such implication is the centrality of human capital theory. In short, human capital refers to the cumulative amount of relevant knowledge, skills, and attributes that can be utilized by employers to keep creating the goods and services that drive our economy. Viewed from this perspective, adult education can help increase the amount of value that is extracted from individuals in the labour market (as capable workers maintain stability in the workplace and thus make an enterprise more profitable; Barnetson, 2018).

In addition, the amount of available human capital a person has can be augmented through education and/or training they receive. As such, human capital theory posits that adult education should be viewed as an investment by future workers hoping to launch a successful career in a field of their choosing (Barnetson, 2018). Thus, one of the key lessons students learn through unpaid practicums is that although the specific learning outcomes of practicum experiences may differ from program to program, a primary purpose of adult education is to prepare them for the labour market, and that *they alone* are responsible for their successes and/or failures.

Lost in this hidden curriculum is the interrogation of hegemonic flows of power that maintain structural inequality (and strategies for challenging/resisting them). The disconnect between activist and neoliberal views on adult education is particularly acute in areas of study that have a more critical orientation (such as Social Work). Codes of ethics in Social Work have increasingly embraced principles of anti-oppressive practice, which in turn has facilitated the use more extensive use of critical theory in classroom settings of post-secondary Social Work programs (Preston, George, & Silver, 2014). However, most Social Work practicums operate under a neoliberalized “agency-based” model, where students are expected to provide individualized and/or group-based services.

The privileging of service-delivery at the expense of the development of a broader understanding of social issues (and how they are situated in the lives of service users) thus trains new Social Workers to address *symptoms* instead of the *causes* of marginalization (Preston, George, & Silver, 2013). As a result, there is little opportunity for students to gain exposure to the daily oppressions encountered by the people they will be serving upon graduation, and even less of a chance to situate their understandings of oppression within a community of practice that will enable them to challenge common sense assumptions about the status quo that they bring to the practicum setting.

The responsabilization hypothesis (Pyysiäinen, Halpin, & Guilfoyle, 2017) that underlies much of the hidden curriculum of unpaid student practicums subtly introduces many other powerful lessons to students as well. As a manifestation of the partnership between post-secondary institutions and the private sector, unpaid practicums can be understood as the post-secondary sector’s key contribution to this partnership. By mandating that WIL components be completed as a condition for graduation, unpaid student practicums reinforce pre-existing class divides in contemporary capitalist society. In addition to tuition costs, Pinkham (2014) contends that students enrolled in unpaid practicums “pay” for the right to work for free in several other ways including:

- the taking on of paid employment outside regular business hours (which can have serious negative impacts on their health);
- the taking on of extra debt to cover living expenses (or the slowing down of debt repayment), which accumulates further interest charges that will take longer to pay off; and
- the acceptance that paid employment will likely be more precarious and poorly paid, as prospective employers seek to take advantage of the labour offered by unpaid practicum students by offering few paid entry-level positions.

As a result, unpaid practicums teach students to internalize the existence of entrenched class hierarchies. Instead of debating how the multiple ways in which unpaid practicums cost students and give an unfair advantage to individuals who can afford to independently finance their studies, students learn the importance of building up their human capital in order to be competitive in the labour market after they graduate (Curiale, 2010).

In addition, it is important to recognize that although practicums are generally designed to provide the links between theory and practice in an applied workplace setting (and thus are essentially components to learning that also meet post-graduation professional designations; Sattler, 2011), not all practicums are unpaid. In fact, a growing body of literature suggests that it is predominantly students enrolled in programs traditionally associated with feminized/caring labour (such as Nursing, Education, Social Work, etc.) that must complete unpaid practicums in order to graduate (Barlow, Pelech, & Badry, 2005). The same is generally not true for traditionally male-dominated professions such as Engineering, Business, and Medicine, which suggests a deep-seated and gendered expectation that the “caring” professions dominated by women are less motivated by extrinsic values (Berthiaume, 2018). Unfortunately, this has the effect of teaching students to accept that “women’s work” is deemed less “valuable” by broader society (Langille, 2015).

Although I cannot provide additional statistical data to validate the claims discussed above, upon reflection, I can confirm that my own personal circumstances with practicum supervision corroborate the conclusions drawn by academic literature on the hidden curriculum of unpaid student practicums. Over the course my career, I have spent roughly five years supervising unpaid practicum students at an immigrant-serving non-profit organization, and an additional five years working as a Faculty Member and CSL/Field Placement Instructor in a human services program at a local community college (for privacy reasons, the names of both will be withheld).

Most of the practicum students I have supervised have been women who are foreign-born or self-identify as Indigenous, and as such, simply being accepted into a post-secondary education program constitutes a major accomplishment in their lives. As well, the majority of the students enrolled in practicum courses I have been involved with (as either the Community Supervisor or Field Placement Instructor) are not wealthy, and openly communicate the struggles they face in balancing the competing demands of school, work, and life. In other words, most of the students I have supervised are *racialized and gendered members of Canada’s working class*.

Although these students have generally excelled in their practicum settings, there have been numerous occasions over the years where I have had to facilitate large group discussions with students upset over the fact that not only were they expected to be unpaid for the labour they provide in practicum settings, but that they had to do so after paying tuition to register in a practicum course that was a requirement to graduate. The expectations of the practicum course often constituted a “disorienting dilemma,” as students had to make alternate arrangements with their employers, childcare providers, and spouses/children to navigate their new responsibilities (Brookfield, 2009).

In addition, reflective journals from these students indicated that outside of an awareness of the fact that they had relatively little power in the workforce, they did not generally view themselves as practicum *students*, but as *workers* auditioning for a prospective employer. Thus, claims that students in unpaid, for-credit practicums engage in a learning environment that is markedly different from what paid employees encounter (Preston et al., 2013) simply do not match my experiences, and I therefore believe that students in unpaid practicums engage in labour that is of material benefit to their hosting agencies.

Furthermore, although almost every student I have supervised has identified how lessons learned in their applied work settings will enable them to be more effective in their post-graduate employment roles, those who are single parents and live on fixed incomes tend to have more difficulty understanding how to demonstrate (critically) reflective practice, are late with assignment submissions, and more often run afoul of mandatory attendance policies at their placement agencies. In contrast, the ones who tend to have an easier time in practicum settings have a greater degree of financial independence, English language proficiency, and comparatively little responsibilities outside of a commitment to their studies. As a result, one outcome of the unpaid student practicum has been that for the most vulnerable students, completing their WIL component is not only about developing the human capital they need to be successful in the workplace, *but of successfully navigating a learning environment that places them at a structural disadvantage when compared to their more affluent peers*.

Spiraling Back: Activism and Adult Learning in Québec’s Intern Rights Movement

In recent years however, adult education has seen the emergence of a nascent Intern Rights movement that seeks to highlight the problems with unpaid work experiences (Webb, 2015). This development lends credence to Bateson’s (1994) assertion that learning is a lifelong process that takes the form of a spiral, and that individuals engage with a particular concept multiple times over the course of their lives. Each engagement is augmented by relevant

experiences that have accumulated in between attempts, thus resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of something that may not have been fully understood in the past (Bateson, 1994). The metaphor of the spiral allows for the adoption of elements from both linear and circular conceptions of learning (linear in the sense that learners' lives do move forward but must sometimes "loop back" to fully grasp the entirety of a concept, and circular in the sense that the present is the nexus between the past and future, and that learning happens when connections are strong between all participants in an educational environment).

One could therefore argue that the Intern Rights movement that has recently emerged in Québec constitutes a spiraling back towards the activist roots of adult education. The movement utilizes a combination of tactics to simultaneously raise public awareness about the prevalence (and exploitive nature) of unpaid internships and pressure government to adopt legislation in support of individuals working for free (Cohen & de Peuter, 2015, p. 591). As such, activists within the movement provide an avenue for adult learning that not only applies to the members of the movement itself, but also for individuals not affiliated with struggles for intern rights to learn more about *what* this movement is trying to accomplish and *why* (Hall, 2006).

Although Intern Rights activism has occurred in other parts of Canada, the movement has been particularly active in recent months in Québec, where students are currently mobilizing to demand an end to *all* unpaid work experiences in post-secondary education. Led predominantly by students enrolled in Social Work, Nursing, and Education programs, organizers have been calling for the end of the devaluation of women's labour and seek to contest what they deem to be the artificial boundaries between learning that occurs in the "class" and "field" settings of unpaid practicums. It is important to note that they have already achieved notable successes in their organizing, as the new provincial government has agreed to provide a wage for students completing practicums in Psychology and the final year of Education (Berthiaume, 2018).

However, students in Québec are continuing to engage in widespread organizing to achieve their goal of securing a salary for *all* student interns, and are motivated by a powerful sense of injustice over the fact that student labour in professions dominated by women is exploited to a degree that other professions are not (Boisvert, Hamel, & Simard, 2018). In working towards a general strike in 2019, students are bringing what Choudry (2014) refers to as "struggle knowledge" into the adult education classroom. Using the ideals of socio-economic justice as the foundation for their arguments, students in Québec's intern rights movement are spiraling back towards adult education's roots in social justice. In their view, education is not neutral, and thus, any learning environment that does not interrogate neoliberal conceptions of adult education is recreating systems of oppression that maintain the status quo (Choudry, 2014).

Whether or not student organizers in Québec will be successful or not remains to be seen, but recent indications are that their efforts have gained traction (with over 55,000 students participating in a week-long strike and walkout in November of 2018; St. Pierre, 2018). Regardless of the overall outcome, there is little doubt that students in Québec have been successful in once again thrusting notions of social justice to the forefront of adult education.

Conclusion

Although learning can simply be understood as the process of using one's prior interpretations to construct new understandings of personal experiences that can facilitate future actions (Mezirow, 1998), such an understanding is problematic when one considers debates surrounding the impact of unpaid practicums on adult education at the post-secondary level.

Despite its roots as a social movement dedicated to the advancement of social justice, under neoliberalism adult education's purpose has shifted more towards the creation of individuals who have the skills, knowledge, and attributes to contribute to the economy (Barnetson, 2018, p. 5). With adult learners being strongly encouraged to focus on developing their own human capital (often at the expense of situating their lived experiences within broader flows of power in their lives), the proliferation of unpaid student practicums facilitates not only the development of skills required to find success in today's global labour market, but also the hidden curriculum of neoliberalized adult education (marked by an acceptance of the structural inequities of the status quo).

However, Québec's Intern Rights movement demonstrates that adult learning can (and often still does) occur within social movements, and that learning occurs within and beyond the movements themselves. The further

consolidation of social movement learning as struggle knowledge in the classrooms of unpaid practicum courses and the escalation of efforts to abolish unpaid student work experiences in Québec provides evidence that the field of adult education may indeed be spiraling back to its activist roots.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexandru Caldararu is currently a student in the Master of Educational Policy Studies program at the University of Alberta, and is based out of Edmonton. His research primarily focuses on the neoliberalization of post-secondary education and the decolonization of the immigration/settlement sector in Canada. He teaches full-time in the post-secondary sector and has spent much of his adult life involved with social movements and organizations struggling for socio-economic equity and justice.