

LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE NEW ECONOMY: RHETORIC OR REALITY?

JANE CRUIKSHANK

HOW HAS THE WORKPLACE CHANGED IN THE NEW ECONOMY? WHAT problems are workers experiencing? Do federal government policies that focus on developing high skills to enhance Canadian competitiveness in the global economy work?

In order to gain a better understanding of the relationship between workplace issues and widely held beliefs about lifelong learning and high skills development, I asked these questions to 11 Saskatchewan-based union organizers and staff representatives in 2003. As well, in 2004, I interviewed seven university-based adult educators from across Canada and asked for their analysis of the issues raised by the union workers. All have been given pseudonyms.

WORKPLACE ISSUES

New Economy supporters speak glowingly of the prosperity that will come to all in the new world of work. They believe that work will become less onerous, that jobs will be stimulating and rewarding, and that flexibility will create better working conditions for workers.¹ But, has this really happened?

I asked the union participants to discuss changes that have occurred in the workplace with the advent of the New Economy and to discuss three “work” issues of importance to them. The issues that emerged most often were workload, job insecurity and loss of job satisfaction.

Workload

Workload was considered to be the main problem workers are encountering in the workplace. Stan argued that, with technology and the downsizing of the 1990s, people’s workloads have “increased quite dramatically.” Amy added:

We all use e-mail now. We all have voice mail now... And those create other changes such as an expectation from people who are sending you an e-mail that, because it’s instantaneous communication, there will be an instantaneous response. It’s the same with voice mail, and I’m frequently quite torn about the intrusion of that technology.

Cell phones are another example. So unless you are really disciplined about it, which I’m not, you’re never really unplugged.

The downsizing of the 1990s has taken a heavy toll on workers. Brian said that, because of the job cuts, there is “a crunch on the workers that are left.” Brian believed that the New Economy is placing tremendous pressure for the “so-called productivity” of workers. “It’s driving people crazy,” he exclaimed. He added, “There’s a lot of pressure on people to perform up to a standard that’s unachievable.”

Because of the heavy workloads, job stress has increased dramatically over the last decade. In 1991, approximately one in ten workers reported high job stress; however, by 2001, the number had increased to one in three, an increase that has been attributed to downsizing, office technology and job insecurity.²

The downsizing of the 1980s and 1990s and the increase in employee workloads have backfired in a number of ways. For example, one study argued that the costs saved by reduced payrolls after the downsizing have been offset by the financial losses that come with increased absenteeism among the survivors.³ Another study looked at the strain high workloads place on the Canadian health care system. The authors noted that, in 2001, high workloads cost the health care system \$5.92 billion, and said:

While employers may be saving money by “doing more with less”, downsizing and rightsizing, Canadian taxpayers are paying a premium for this strategy as it is their tax dollars that are funding the health care system.⁴



EN BREF Certains profitent de ce que l'on appelle la nouvelle économie, mais beaucoup perdent au change. Sauf pour quelques professions, le Canada manque de travailleurs à niveau élevé de compétences. Le Canada manque de bons emplois pour les travailleurs très spécialisés. Notre main-d'œuvre stressée comprend une foule de travailleurs malheureux, souvent sous-employés, qui doivent « faire plus avec moins » au nom de la compétitivité mondiale. Dans un tel contexte, l'apprentissage permanent est devenu une stratégie de survie, une tâche qui se rajoute à une charge de travail déjà accablante. Pour mettre au point des politiques soutenant les travailleurs, nous devons dépasser la simple acquisition de compétences et tenir également compte de la question des emplois et de leur qualité. Pour mieux comprendre le lien existant entre les enjeux du travail et les croyances longtemps tenues au sujet de l'apprentissage permanent et de l'acquisition de compétences spécialisées, onze organisateurs syndicaux et représentants du personnel de la Saskatchewan et sept andragogues d'universités canadiennes ont été interviewés.



Job Insecurity

The years of downsizing have had an impact that continues to resonate throughout the workplace. Because workers have watched their colleagues lose their jobs, many feel insecure and threatened. Brenda said that workers are afraid to stand up for themselves for fear they will lose their jobs "or be next in line when job cuts get handed out." She said, that "even though they know it is a unionized workplace and they know they have protections under the collective agreement, there is a lot of fear." This has implications for workload issues. Brenda said:

What has happened is that people are being expected to take on the duties of their departed colleagues without an increase in pay – the old "do more with less." And because people are quite afraid to be the next to be cut, they do it without squawking.

Because many of the new jobs being created are part-time, low-paying, service sector jobs, workers have good reason to be afraid. For example, in the first three months of 2005, Canadian employers "slashed 10,000 full-time jobs and added 36,000 part-time positions."⁵ Statistics Canada noted that, in 1989, 11 percent of newly hired workers in the private sector held temporary jobs, however, by 2004, this number had jumped to 21 percent.⁶ As a result of this trend, we now find that only 63 percent of Canadian workers hold full-time permanent jobs, leaving 37 percent of workers in self-employment or in part-time or temporary "contingent" jobs.⁷

Loss of Job Satisfaction

Participants spoke of the downgrading of jobs that has taken place since the early 1990s, and the effect of this on workers. Brenda said that workers want to feel they "are doing something useful," but they are being bombarded with messages that they are not valuable and can easily be replaced. Because of the lay-offs during the last decade, Brenda said, "there's been a boxing in of people's expectations." Work, she said, has become "nastier and more brutish."

Kate believes the introduction of technology into the workplace has resulted in a deskilling of jobs, a loss of autonomy for workers, and an increased surveillance of workers. She said that many people have jobs that, in the past, covered a variety of activities. However, computers have been used to "atomize those skills" so that now people are "doing a very narrow range of activities," a process that makes it easy for employers to contract out parcels of work. Kate said, the workplace has become "much more hierarchical and much more punitive, much more rigid and rule-oriented" and, as a result, many workplaces are filled with unhappy workers.

LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE HIGH SKILLS CHALLENGE

Historically, lifelong learning (under the name adult education) in Canada had a broad base and covered a wide variety of purposes and activities. Many programs included social, community and social justice visions and worked to strengthen local communities.

CANADIAN GOVERNMENT LIFELONG LEARNING POLICIES HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY TIED TO HIGH SKILLS DEVELOPMENT. FEDERAL PAPERS ARE FILLED WITH STATEMENTS STRESSING THE IMPORTANCE OF ADDRESSING THE “SKILLS CHALLENGE.”

However, with the advent of the so-called New Economy, this has changed. We are being told we must develop skills so that Canada can be competitive in the global economy. Canadian government lifelong learning policies have become increasingly tied to high skills development. Federal papers are filled with statements stressing the importance of addressing the “skills challenge.” For example, an Industry Canada document claims that Canada’s goal is to “develop the most skilled and talented labour force in the world.”⁸

Words such as the “learning society” and the “knowledge society” are becoming commonplace. Lifelong learning is being promoted as the key to success in the high skills knowledge economy. Government policy papers argue that, by investing in themselves through education and training, Canadians can earn higher salaries throughout their lifetimes and this will enhance Canada’s economic growth. However, high skills policies emphasize colleges, universities, and training organizations as the basis of our economic competitiveness. They ignore the jobs side of the equation. They believe that an unfettered market will magically lead to the creation of good high quality jobs. The federal government outlined its commitment to human capital policies in its 2002 policy report titled *Knowledge Matters: Skills and Learning for Canadians*. The report states:

To remain competitive and keep up with the accelerating pace of technological change, Canada must continuously renew and upgrade the skills of its workforce. We can no longer assume that the skills acquired in youth will carry workers through their active lives. Rather, the working life of most adults must be a period of continuous learning.⁹

The report describes a framework for implementing the skills agenda. The three main aspects of the framework are: strengthening accessibility to post-secondary education, building a world class workforce, and recognizing the credentials of immigrants. While recognizing the credentials of immigrants clearly is long overdue, the report also stresses that, by 2010, 65 percent of adult immigrants must have post-secondary education. This unwavering focus on high skills is extremely controversial.

CRITIQUING THE HIGH SKILLS CHALLENGE

We are being told that, along with traditional educational institutions, new training organizations form and will provide Canadians with an abundance of lifelong learning opportunities. People who take advantage of these opportunities will thrive in the new knowledge economy. But, is this really the case for the majority of workers, particularly given the types of jobs that are being created in the New Economy? Will more high skills training actually provide more high quality jobs?

I asked the participants about their perceptions of the

current high skills focus of Canada’s lifelong learning policies. Many of the participants were highly critical of these policies and offered critiques that, hopefully, will generate discussion and debate.

Defining the Problem

Many participants argued that both governments and business are misdiagnosing the problem. Wesley, a university professor, was clear that the problem is not a high skills deficit, but a lack of good jobs for people with these skills. Speaking of the skill deficit discourse, Wesley said, “This is the whole notion of blaming the victim, insisting on a skill deficit that doesn’t exist and misdiagnosing the problem.” Many people believe that the skills of millions of Canadians are being wasted because they are employed in jobs that don’t require their skills. For example, Jim Stanford, an economist with the Canadian Auto Workers Union, argued that one-quarter of Canadians with post-secondary education “are employed in clerical, sales, and menial service jobs.”¹⁰ Consequently, while the rhetoric focuses on the lack of skills of workers, many of the new jobs being created simply do not require high skills.

A number of research participants spoke of the low-skilled, part-time jobs that are being created. For example, Stephen spoke of call centres re-locating to Saskatchewan and argued that these employers come to Saskatchewan solely because government provides financial incentives. Stephen described them as “very poor employers.” Referring to workers, he said, “I just see a lot of discouragement.”

Skills Agenda

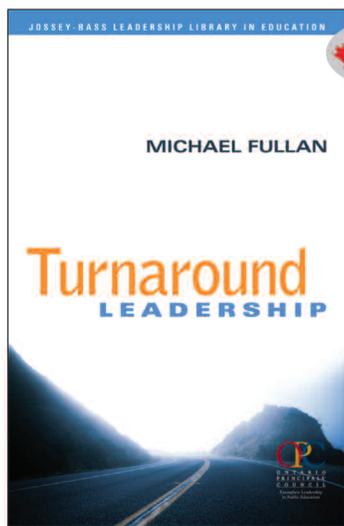
Kate spoke of the narrowness of the skills agenda. She believes that education should be about “the ability to think” and “to develop oneself.” She argued that the skills agenda is oriented to a narrow range of skills, many of which have a very short shelf life. She said:

Yes, we do need skills. Everyone of us has to have some type of a job or some way to help ourselves, and that’s why I don’t want to downplay having certain skills...But, on the other hand, I feel like this is being held over our heads that the only thing that’s wrong with the world is “you guys don’t have the right skills.”

In the 1990s, many manufacturing jobs moved overseas to Third World countries where the salaries are considerably lower. Similar problems now are happening with high skills jobs, particularly in areas such as information/technology, finance,¹¹ and legal work.¹² Many of these jobs are moving to countries such as India, where highly qualified workers will work for a fraction of the cost of Canadian workers. For example, a report by PricewaterhouseCoopers predicted that by 2010, 14% of all current IT jobs will move to low cost countries like India, China and Russia. By 2010, it predicted that 75,000 Canadian IT jobs will move overseas or be repatriated to the United States. The report maintained that in any IT business, only 30 percent of IT staff must be close to the customers; the remaining 70 percent can be located anywhere in the world. In fact, “any knowledge-based function that does not require direct personal interaction is a candidate” for outsourcing.¹³ In short, while the rhetoric focuses on high skills, many of these high skill jobs are beginning to disappear.



The Jossey-Bass Leadership Library in Education

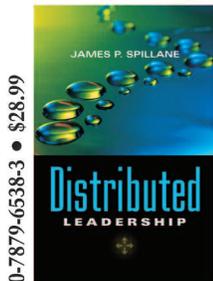


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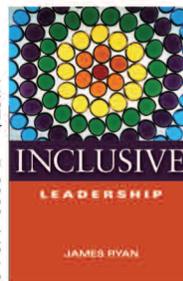
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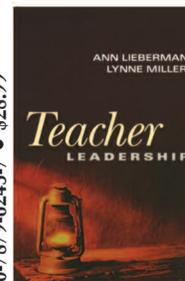
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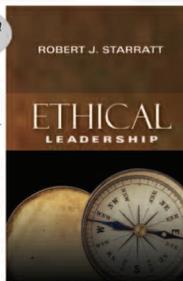


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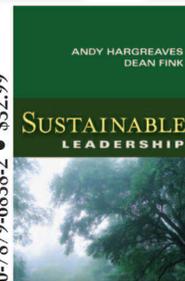


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Credentialism

A number of participants spoke of credentialism that is occurring in the workplace. Andrew spoke of the rising education levels of workers and the fact that the educational bar "keeps going up." He said, "There's nothing fundamentally wrong with a more educated workforce. But at certain points, what's bona fide in terms of the requirements for a job?" Wesley argued that workers are doing a great deal to upgrade their knowledge and skills. The problem, he said, is:

More and more employers are asking more and more employees to get more and more credentials of knowledge without in any way fundamentally modifying the job structure...And hence we have a growing underemployment problem.

Canada has one of the highest qualified workforces in the world. In 2003, 60.7 percent of the labour force between the ages of 25 and 54 had a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree.¹⁴ According to Statistics Canada, 4,483,200 Canadians had a post-secondary certificate or diploma, and 2,905,800 had a university degree.¹⁵ However, 25 percent of Canadian workers believe they are overqualified for their jobs, a perception that was held by workers holding diplomas as well as bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees.¹⁶ One study noted that 29 percent of university graduates are working in jobs that do not require a university degree, and one in five workers with post-secondary credentials is working in a job that requires a high school diploma.¹⁷ As well, educational credentials do not guarantee a living wage. In 2003, 14 percent of employed adults in Canada worked for less than \$10.00 an hour. Among this group, 38 percent had a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree.¹⁸



CANADA DOES NOT LACK WORKERS WITH HIGH SKILLS. CANADA LACKS

DECENT JOBS FOR HIGHLY SKILLED WORKERS.

CONCLUSION

Some people are benefiting in the so-called New Economy, but many are losing. Except for a few specific professions, Canada does not lack workers with high skills. Canada lacks decent jobs for highly skilled workers. We have a stressed out workforce filled with unhappy, often underemployed, workers who are told to "do more with less" in the name of global competitiveness. Lifelong learning, in this environment, has become a survival strategy and a chore that is tacked onto an already overwhelming workload. In order to develop policies that are supportive of workers, we must not only look at developing skills. We must also look at the issue of jobs and job quality.

Lifelong learning policies designed to enhance our global competitiveness are controversial. Some people agree with these policies, some oppose them. I believe that if lifelong learning policies are to focus on high skills development, then we must also look at the quality of jobs available for people with these skills. We must re-think both our lifelong learning policies and our job creation policies to ensure that they benefit not only business, but also – and more importantly – workers and the communities in which they live. |

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Notes

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