Abstract: The OECD Jobs Study report, written in 1994, presents a disturbing economic development strategy for use by its member countries. The concept of “lifelong learning” plays an important role in this strategy. This paper questions the direction advocated in the OECD report, explores the strategies that have been adopted in Canada, and suggests a role for adult educators to play to address issues of work.

Introduction

The world of work is changing rapidly. Under the banner of “economic globalization” and the need to be competitive in the international economy, corporations have restructured to give their shareholders immediate profits. By automating their operations, they have eliminated hundreds of thousands of full-time jobs. In the process, the business rhetoric, using words like “re-engineered” “reorganized” and “de-layered,” has depersonalized the victims of this new economy. Because of the popularization of this language, we now view workplaces from the perspective of management, as places that must be restructured if they are to compete globally (Finlayson, 1996).

Why has the workplace changed to such an extent? How did we get to this state? What role are adult educators expected to play in the “new economy”? Building on a review of the literature, this paper explores these questions. It looks at an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Jobs Study report advocating a regressive approach to job creation and training, describes how Canada has followed the path urged by this report and discusses the impact on unemployed and underemployed Canadians. It suggests a role for adult educators to play address the issue of work.

The term "economic globalization" refers to the transformation of the world’s economies into a world economy, placing the interests of transnational corporations ahead of those of individual nations. It has changed the lives of workers everywhere.

Jobs are being dramatically restructured, creating a highly polarized workforce. At one end are highly skilled, well-paid professionals, semi-professionals and tradespeople with relatively stable jobs; at the other end, people in both blue and white collar work stalled in unskilled, low-paying, casual or part-time jobs, eking out an existence that is far from secure.

We live in a society of growing extremes—extremes that have widened dangerously since the signing of the Free Trade Agreement between Canada and the United States in 1989. During this time, corporations and the wealthy have been given huge tax breaks to help them become globally “competitive,” while, at the same time, the rate of child poverty has increased 49%. An alarming 19.8% of Canadian children now live in poverty (Campaign 2000). In 1980, there were no food banks in Canada. There are now an estimated 2,000 and the number of people needing them for basic survival continues to grow (Jackson & Robinson, 2000)—more than 800,000 Canadians now rely on donated food for part of every month (Food bank, 1999/2000). Angus Reid (1996), who heads up one of Canada’s largest polling firms and has written a strong critique
of the new economy and its impact on Canadians, argues:

What the new economy is producing is job insecurity, longer working hours, a surplus of labour, more part-time workers, a social safety net full of holes and the potential for growing income disparities between the rich and the poor. (p. 190)
Workplace change has happened so quickly, that few of us realize its extent.

Canada now has a system in which workers at the top seem to be rewarded with large salary increases while workers lower down are expected to be grateful just to have a job. The polarization of work into “good jobs” and “bad jobs” is transforming our society. Many Canadians accept this polarization and the widening gap between the working rich and the working poor as inevitable, as something beyond our control.

**OECD Jobs Study Report**

A 1994 Jobs Study report from the OECD proposes a draconian economic development strategy – a strategy that clearly has been followed in Canada. The authors believed that member OECD countries had not responded “appropriately” to the demands of economic globalization and challenged them to “strengthen the capacity to adjust to rapid change” (p. 29). The report states that employment protection policies and practices of governments, unions and businesses in member countries have decreased their countries’ ability and will to adapt to change. It disparages the growth of public sector jobs in the 1970s, claiming it led to the diminishment of “the incentive to accept work—particularly low-paying or precarious work” (p. 30). In addition, it says, low-wage jobs were “disallowed by society, whether through state-imposed or union-negotiated wage/income floors and employment protection” (p. 30) and these practices have impacted negatively on a country’s ability to “adapt” to the new global economy.

The Jobs Study report presents a two-pronged challenge: to examine social policies of member countries for the extent to which “each may have contributed to ossifying the capacity of economies and the will of societies to adapt: and then to consider how to remove those disincentives” (pg. 30). It favours creation of jobs only in the private sector, and in two distinct streams: skilled jobs which would have high knowledge requirements; and low-wage jobs which would “absorb significant numbers of low-skilled unemployed workers” (p. 33).

The OECD document describes ways to ensure workers are desperate enough to take “low-paying and precarious” jobs. For example, in a section titled “Disincentives to Hiring,” the report calls for changes in attitudes and practices, especially in the areas of taxation, social policy and collective bargaining. It advocates cuts to social spending, and explores ways to increase the hiring of low-wage workers such as lowering minimum wages, reworking employment-protection legislation and lowering trade barriers. All of this is built upon the unquestioned ideological assumption that member countries “must adjust to changing circumstances” (p. 36), meaning corporate globalization.

This assumption--that OECD countries and their citizens must adapt to the demands of the corporate elite--goes unchallenged by governments, the business community and the news media. It is accepted as a given, as an inevitable part of progress—a testament to the effectiveness of an ongoing and well-orchestrated corporate public relations strategy.
Structural Adjustment in Canada

In the prosperous postwar period of the late ‘40s and ‘50s, Canada developed a number of income and social security programs to prevent a return to the abject poverty that so many Canadians experienced during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The Canada Assistance Plan, the Canada Pension Plan and the Unemployment Insurance program were designed to be a social safety net to help all Canadians meet a minimum standard of living.

With the introduction of the North American free trade agreements, there has been a dramatic social restructuring in Canada. In order to “compete in the global economy” and to have a “level playing field” with the U.S., Canada’s social programs have been slashed to “harmonize” with those of the U.S. We have seen massive spending cuts to basic social and economic development programs, including health, education and housing--cuts that have seriously injured many Canadians. With the elimination of the Canada Assistance Plan in 1996 and the massive cuts to health, education and social services, the federal government launched an outright attack on social spending.

Broad (2000) speaks of the rapid shift to the lean state in the 1990s. He discusses the renewed attacks on labour and, in particular, on public sector workers, the restructuring of social programs and a reduction of the welfare state. By restricting access to social programs and cutting social assistance and unemployment insurance benefits, Canada, clearly, has implemented parts of the OECD Jobs Report. As a direct result of our shredded social safety net, many people now find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle, of low-wage contingent jobs, from which they cannot escape.

The Role of Lifelong Learning

The OECD Jobs Study, which advocates creating and entrenching a two-tiered jobs system that would widen the gap between the working rich and the working poor, sees “lifelong learning” as central to the process of increasing the skills of those in the high-wage tier. The OECD concept of lifelong learning is limited, however, to learning specifically for jobs; the study argues that “vocational and academic studies should both prepare and stimulate students for entrepreneurial activities” (p. 38). The educational needs or interests of the worker are irrelevant. Learning is an investment in business and in the economies of member countries. It is clear that business interests have hijacked the concept of lifelong learning. The following “business-speak” says it all:

A more radical solution would be reforms to accounting standards which could help improve information on the value of training investments, as would agreed upon, and implementation of, training standards and credentials. This would enable financial markets to account for the stock of workforce skills in a firm as part of recorded assets, in turn encouraging investors to invest in firms with proven track records in training their workforces. (OECD, 1994, p. 38)

Unfortunately, in Canada, adult education seems to be following this path. Adult education in this country has a rich history and, in the past, covered a broad spectrum of activities
(Selman, Cooke, Selman & Dampier, 1998; Welton, 1987). With the onset of corporate globalization, however, HRD has gained considerable prominence.

I believe there are problems with adult educators aligning themselves so closely to an HRD strategy in the new economy as it eschews traditional adult education values by looking at the world through the narrow lens of business and the powerful, rather than that of the broader society. Organizational HRD approaches tend to further polarize the workforce by helping people who already have skills move into higher positions and ignores those who most need training. This widens the gap between the working rich and the working poor and reinforces an unjust system that is wreaking havoc on the lives of people worldwide. As well, adult education becomes a service industry, serving the needs and interests of business. We become part of the corporate world.

The ideology of retraining is predicated on the idea that there is plenty of work and that retrained workers will easily find jobs. This is a false understanding of the new economy and the types of jobs that are being created, and makes it easy to see the unemployed and underemployed as being responsible for their own misfortune. Such a blame-the-victim argument reinforces and legitimizes the inequities within the system.

Reid (1996) argues that, while some jobs go begging due to a lack of skilled workers, this is not the norm. In essence, it “doesn’t matter how willing, or how trained, workers are if improved technology and a global marketplace are creating a society in which there will not—cannot—be enough decent jobs to go around” (pp. 192-193). The problem is not one of skill shortages, but a “highly educated workforce chasing fewer and fewer jobs that actually demand high levels of qualifications” (Jackson & Robinson, 2000, p. 48). Thus, many people are unemployed and underemployed, not because they lack skills, but because there are too few jobs.

This takes us back to the OECD report that clearly recognizes that there will be some high-paying jobs and many low-paying contingent jobs. Because there will never be enough “good” jobs to go around, the main strategy of the OECD for reducing unemployment is to promote the growth of the low-wage jobs by reducing wages and eliminating social supports, effectively forcing people to take them.

Role for Adult Educators

Often we talk about the need for adult educators to be “political,” and assume that we have a common understanding of the term. Cevero & Wilson (1999) identify two explicitly political perspectives that adult educators tend to take: the pragmatic perspective (the political is practical: the ability to get things done) and the structural analysis perspective (the political is structural: redistributing power). It is clear to me that the problems that we face in the new economy are structural and, consequently, it is important to work from a structural perspective.

Society is being restructured into two distinct groups of people – the “winners” and the “losers.” It is not by chance that we are becoming a polarized society. We are living in a class system and that the elite are structuring the new economy in a way that will most benefit them. They have created a form of Social Darwinism—a survival-of-the-fittest, winner-take-all society. As adult educators, we need to ask ourselves if we want to support this type of a system. Whose interests are we furthering? What are the ethics of what we are being asked to do? We need to
develop a clear understanding of how society is changing. Without this, as Miles (1998) argues, adult educators can “unknowingly become tools in the implementation of unjust policies and…complicit with the destructive neo-liberal agenda” (p. 253).

Korten (1996) argues that change has happened so quickly, few of us realize its extent. He believes we must begin to explore alternative visions of society and identifies the biggest barrier to change as the lack of public discussion and debate on the subject. The public has been bombarded with slogans like “we have no alternative” and thus has not engaged in any meaningful debate on the future of work. Finlayson (1996) believes that people have not challenged the dominant agenda because they are frightened by the changes that are transforming the workplace. She argues that the corporate agenda has:

Caused us to believe that we are losing all control over the forces that govern our lives. It has also caused us to believe that our politicians are paralysed by circumstances, and have no real choices on economic policy. It has caused us to believe that our society has no real choices, that we are in the midst of an economic cataclysm that we have no hope of mitigating. (p. 70)

McQuaig (1998), too, speaks of the image of government impotence that has been carefully crafted by big business. She argues that governments do have “autonomy to pursue policies aimed at full employment and well-funded social programs” (p. 255), but they must make choices. To date, they seem to be unwilling to make such choices and, instead, hide behind the “free market” ideology. Finlayson (1996) adds:

In the last decade or so, Canadians have been denied the opportunity to engage in calm, thoughtful—and genuinely inclusive—discussions of how best to solve the workplace problems that confront us now and those that will confront us in the twenty-first century. In accepting the proposition that market forces alone should determine the way we live our lives and organize our society, we have also accepted the proposition that there is really nothing to discuss. (p. 202)

It is important for adult educators to educate and help organize around the issue of work and the new global economy that is adversely affecting so many Canadians. We need to encourage discussion and debate around the direction Canada is taking and should be involved in organizing around social policy issues. The federal government has joined with other OECD countries in following the path advocated by the OECD Jobs Study report, a neo-conservative path designed to benefit the wealthy at the expense of ordinary people. Adult educators need to raise questions about this direction and explore its consequences for society. We can do this both in our classrooms and through the development of educational programs and public forums in the broader community.

**Conclusion**

Canada is becoming a highly polarized country: some people have benefited greatly in the new economy, many others have become trapped in a vicious spiral of poverty. This type of
polarization is wrong—it is bad for society in general and it is bad for the people trapped in low-wage work specifically.

Education has often been considered a “great equalizer” in our society. Ironically, education now tends to increase the polarization between the working rich and the working poor. The “have” get more while the “have nots” are tossed aside. And adult educators are being asked to support the inequitable distribution of wealth by buying into the human resource development model of lifelong learning.

Korten (1996) says, “we are caught in a terrible dilemma. We have reached a point in history where we must rethink the very nature and meaning of human progress” (p. 29). Adult educators have a clear role to play in this process, if they so choose. There are many issues around work and the changing workplace that must be opened for public discussion and debate. It is important to help people understand what is at stake with the changes that are taking place in the new economy.

We need to look at the corporatisation of Canada and explore how studies conducted by organizations like the OECD impact on our everyday work lives. These organizations and their supporters hold a tremendous amount of power—and it is power that is being used to support the wealthy.

As adult educators, we need to draw on our past successes and look for ways to engage people in a public discussion about the kind of world Canadians want to see. We need to explore democratic options and lobby governments to ensure that citizens, not corporations, have control over the direction that Canada pursues.

References


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