Charting the Course From the Knowledge Economy to the Learning Society: Adult Educators as Map Makers

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The knowledge economy has become a familiar phrase in government, academic and business circles. While the concept may have a certain surface cachet, it begins to lose its lustre on closer inspection, revealing its narrowly instrumental values and its emphasis on contributing to the corporate bottom line.

Essentially, economies are concerned with the production and distribution of goods otherwise in short supply. Knowledge would not seem to be in short supply because it is constructed by people around the world every day. So the idea of the knowledge economy appears to be an oxymoron, a contradictory concept that carries little meaning. To compound matters, in the so-called knowledge economy, no effort is made to distinguish between knowledge and falsehood, knowledge and information, or knowledge and skills. In spite of this web of meaninglessness, the concept has caught on and spread as common currency among such diverse groups as the World Bank, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and universities. How does this acceptance of the knowledge economy affect adult educators and society as a whole? How can adult educators break past the narrow boundaries of the knowledge economy and help to chart the course for a learning society that does not exclude those without the money to ante up in the global casino? This paper will examine the shortcomings of the knowledge economy and explore the possibilities for stepping outside the demands of corporate globalization and building the learning society through communities of knowledge.

Knowledge

While the knowledge economy is predicated on the commodification of knowledge, knowledge itself cannot be confined to such narrow parameters. Forbidden or otherwise, it has been central to our evolution as a species, as well as a key to power. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986), authors of *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, remind us that our basic assumptions about the origins of knowledge shape the way we see the world and ourselves as participants in it.

In spite of the fact that “the human interest in knowledge is a plural one” (Morrow and Torres, 1995), certain restrictive forms of knowledge have dominated human existence, taking on the mantle of “expert knowledge.” This expert knowledge has, in turn, been understood as a kind of official knowledge that supports the dominant groups in society. Cunningham (1988) explains the role of such official knowledge from a Gramscian perspective: “All bodies of knowledge are not equal. The knowledge that supports the dominant paradigms in a culture is systematically produced, disseminated, and reified so as to become common sense to the average
citizen.”

One of the ways that official knowledge supports the dominant paradigms in a culture involves either the co-option or dismissal of knowledge that does not conform to this notion of “common sense.” All forms of knowledge have the potential to be co-opted into maintaining the status quo. Those forms of knowledge that cannot be co-opted are ignored, marginalized or criminalized. In this vein, it is interesting to note that dissent, which involves the withdrawal of consent to official knowledge, has recently been criminalized in the repressive aftermath of September 11.

Official knowledge has excluded other forms of knowledge throughout history. Indigenous knowledge, women’s knowledge, experiential knowledge, transformative knowledge, situated knowledge and local knowledge have all experienced the exclusionary power of the official knowledge regime. What is unprecedented, however, is the range and control of current forms of official knowledge. Their breadth of reach and depth of penetration have been made possible by the commodification of knowledge on a global scale and the creation of the knowledge economy.

**The Commodification of Knowledge**

Commodification is an essential aspect of corporate globalization. In tandem with consumption, it forms a twin dynamic that can produce the increased profits that investors restlessly seek. While by no means a new phenomenon, the process of commodification has intensified as the economy has gone global.

According to Thrift (1994), the process of commodification has reached into every nook and cranny of modern life: in Western countries practically every human activity relies on or has certain commodities associated with it, and in non-Western societies, the process of commodification has increasingly taken hold. Accelerated in the global market system, the process of commodification is at the heart of many of the problems we face in the world today. One of the casualties of the commodification process has been knowledge itself. While intangible in the sense that it is not a product produced in a factory, knowledge is not only capable of being commodified, but has been commodified in different ways over many years. This commodification process is intensifying, legitimized by slogans like the knowledge economy.

In the so-called knowledge economy, knowledge is moved from the public realm into private control, then priced, packaged and profited from. And through the expansion of the global market, this privatization of knowledge is increasing, with more and more knowledge formerly held in the public realm being transferred to a “corporate sector that views knowledge merely as another commodity to be bartered in the marketplace” (Berman 1998).

Blunden (1999) has argued that the introduction of commodification into areas where value-relations have not penetrated has consistently lead to social upheaval. For example, he describes the introduction of women’s labour into the market system.

There has always been women’s labour; women have always worked ...when women’s labour became valued, rather than something tendered within relations of *domestic servitude*, then enormous social upheavals followed (p. 2).

Blunden (1999) continues that “there is good reason to believe then, that the
commodification of knowledge is leading to major social change and upheaval” (p. 2). The threat of this change and upheaval becomes evident when we understand that in the age of corporate globalization, those without “passports to the knowledge economy” (Local Futures 2001) will be lucky to find employment in low-pay sectors such as the service industry.

**Adult Educators as Map Makers to the Learning Society**

Adult educators have a long history of recognizing many forms of education, engaging in different kinds of learning and valorizing the range of knowledge in the world. With this understanding, they can help to break the corporate stranglehold on knowledge production, knowledge management and knowledge exchange. Adult educators can be map makers - charting the course away from the knowledge economy and toward the learning society. By opening up new ideas and new possibilities, and linking different social groups, adult educators can illuminate a range of choices and directions for the learning society. One of these choices involves building communities of knowledge. Paulo Freire (1996) captured the idea of communities of knowledge when he proposed that:

> Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

Central to the idea of communities of knowledge is the understanding that knowledge is a “social artifact” (Raiskums 2001, p. 49), constructed by people in society. As such, it is “irreducibly social” (Barnes 2000, p. 452) by its very nature. This understanding can form the basis of the learning society.

Once produced, knowledge assumes a life of its own. It becomes “an entity in its own right, possessing an existence of its own and distinct from the knowers who produce it” (Wojciechowski 2001, p. 1). As an entity in its own right, knowledge becomes something we have a relationship with.

Our relationship with knowledge has been described by Wojciechowski (2001) as the “ecology of knowledge.” Just as ecology studies the relationship between organisms and their environment, the ecology of knowledge studies the relationship between humans and the body of knowledge that forms a distinct element of their environment and a rapidly growing factor in human life (p. 1).

This relationship, however, is not fully understood, nor is it exclusively beneficial (Wojciechowski 2001, p. 6). The increasing commodification of knowledge is just one example of our less-than-beneficial relationship with knowledge. But like all relationships, this one can change. Reaching out to build new relations of knowledge production can turn a harmful relationship into a beneficial one.

To say that knowledge is produced suggests “an active process of creative construction ‘on site’ according to specific local rules and conditions” (Barnes 2000, p. 452):

> Specifically, producing knowledge entails a confluence of the right conditions of production: people, places, ideas and material artefacts (p. 452).
One of the ways of achieving that confluence of conditions is to reach out to other knowledge producers - not to reinforce an exclusionary knowledge economy but to build an open, accessible learning society. A form of resistance in itself, reaching out begins with the understanding that knowledge reflects the social conditions under which it is produced and transmitted. Cunningham (1993) argues that we must acknowledge the social production of knowledge, and understand that if knowledge is socially produced, then knowledge can be produced by any group of people. Working from Gramsci’s notion of organic intellectuals, Cunningham poses a series of questions:

Whose knowledge are we studying? Why? Is there an official knowledge? Why? Are some people privileged by the knowledge we study? If so, who? If knowledge is socially produced, am I a producer or consumer? Why? If knowledge is affected by the socially constructed culture and the context from which it arose, then whose culture is being celebrated? If social knowledge is not objective, then how does that affect the way we conduct research? If objectivity is the not the only way of knowing, in what other ways can we know? (p. 11)

Cunningham’s questions raise the issue of power and knowledge production. Who has the power to control and legitimize knowledge production? While this power used to reside with diverse elite groups, including adult educators, it is now being concentrated in the hands of transnational corporations. Many adult educators suddenly find themselves in the position of other groups of disenfranchised knowledge producers, such as women, rural people and indigenous people. To overcome this disenfranchisement, adult educators can set the example and continue to do what they do best: reaching out and building alliances with knowledge producers within the community. These alliances begin with a fundamental understanding:

Knowledge is produced when people make sense of their world and knowledge is based on their experience as they construct tools, methods, and approaches to cope with the situations facing them. This meaning-making notion of knowledge production leads to an understanding of power imbalances in society (Hill, 1998, p. 4).

Understanding that knowledge is socially produced changes the way people relate to it, and changes the way they relate to those who have the power to control it. No longer merely the purview of experts or the private property of transnational corporations, knowledge can emerge from many locations. Finger and Asún (2001, p. 144-5) refer to such knowledge as “endogenous knowledge,” proposing that it celebrates the awareness of the social construction of knowledge and takes on the responsibility to create alternative futures. Reaching out makes the knowledge that is produced rich and varied, creating a kind of epistemic diversity that challenges the packaged homogeneity of commodified knowledge.

Alliances are already being formed in the field of knowledge production. For example, Miles (1996) describes how transformative feminists clearly recognize that progressive change will involve drawing on the resources of many holistic, nondualistic, nonhierarchical knowledges which have been denied and destroyed by the colonial and patriarchal imposition of dualistic
competitive values and structures on indigenous people as well as women (p. 286).

While some adult educators may even have been implicated in such colonial and patriarchal impositions, they can leave these practices behind and join as equals in the global resistance to corporate domination by encouraging communities of knowledge. Working with rural miners in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky, Reid and Taylor (2000) offer a model for reaching out to form such communities. Their model involves what they call “participatory reason,” which requires thinking that is attuned to, and characterized by, emergence (rather than mechanical causality), the matrixical, and acceptance that the universal, as thought by humans, is always embedded in, emergent from, the local and concrete. New forms of alliance between “local” and “expert” knowledges could be a powerful site from which to unsettle these reifying dualisms (p. 462-3).

New forms of alliance between local and expert knowledges could also be a powerful site from which to unsettle the commodification of knowledge itself. These non-commodified communities of knowledge would be “off the grid” in terms of commodification, given the restricted market such local understanding would provide. But they would be networked by a common understanding in the inherent use value of what they know in their particular ways - that life, in its wildly divergent forms around the world, does not exist to serve money, but that money exists to serve life.

Such knowledge is never scarce, can never be made scarce, because it is publicly owned knowledge that is produced every day through the lives of people who are working to resist the effects of corporate globalization. Whether their resistance involves fighting the takeover of common land, the closure of schools and hospitals, the clearcutting of forests, the amalgamation of municipalities, the downloading of services or the arrival of big box stores, these people produce knowledge that is vital to life, not the global corporate market. The distinctive characteristic of communities of knowledge is that they share knowledge - they don’t hoard it. In this way, knowledge becomes part of the commons, not the private preserve of a privileged few. It can be treasured as a form of common wealth in the learning society, a resource for the present and an investment in the future. Communities of knowledge can be a vibrant part of the learning society, and adult educators can make the maps to take us there. While some maps merely replicate the existing territory, the rise of the knowledge economy is one of those issues that calls for charting “the frontiers of the adult education landscape” (Rubenson 2000, p. 398). Those frontiers lead us beyond the neoliberal confines of the knowledge economy to a more open, accessible learning society that acknowledges many forms of knowledge, validates social as well as individual learning and builds the common-wealth for all. Adult educators can be the map makers for this learning society, enabling communities of knowledge and creating alternative futures by linking diverse communities together, by encouraging people to cultivate their ‘commons sense’ and by creating spaces where many kinds of knowledge can grow.

References


